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"MRS. DEVERIL, RUSHING IN, THREW HERSELF AT SIR HERWARD'S FEET."

A Widow's Wiles; or, A Bitter Vengeance.

BY RACHEL BERNHARDT.

CHAPTER I.

PLOTS AND PLOTTERS.

"REALLY, this is charming! I never beheld anything like it! Such a sight makes Herod appear a greater monster than ever. Is it not so, Mr. Herbert?"

The speaker was a tall, handsome woman, of about eight-and-twenty,

who, with Herbert Cunningham, stood on the broad terrace of Cunningham Castle, looking upon a scene well worthy encomium.

The grounds, as the Castle, were of feudal date, and remained in all their ancient grandeur, disfigured by no hideous modern innovation of masses of staring color and ribbon flower-beds.

There were sweeps of velvety lawns, where the sunlight loved to linger, merging into half-lights and cool shades as some ancient oak or beech spread wide its thickly-foliaged branches. There were avenues of chestnuts, and pleasant alleys, still and hushed, like academic groves. It was a silent, dream-like place, where one, leaning on the terrace, might, were he or she imaginative, fancy each past generation wandering in its time—each costume not incongruous, but in excellent harmony—from Richard Lion Heart to the Regency; glittering, making seeming of

right earnest love, or plotting the overthrow of nations or party.

Flirtation, love making, plotting, were yet rampant—do they ever die!—though, apparently, the scene was a most modern and innocent one; namely a *fete* given by Sir Hereward Cunningham to the children of the parish schools.

The soft summer air rung with children's laughter. Bright marquees were erected on the lawns, where the small guests might eat cake and drink tea to repletion, waited upon by ladies in elegant summer costumes, and with hands white, soft, and much unused to all this kind of thing; yet, on the whole, rather amused at the novelty.

Such was the scene that Mrs. Howard Deveril, her graceful figure attired in the latest and most becoming of Worth's toilettes, looked upon from the terrace, backed by the gray stone towers, battlements, and deep-mullioned, casemented windows of the Castle.

Had any modern Paris been called upon to bestow the gods' apple upon the fairest woman in Weirbourne, most surely in justice, without hesitation, he would have handed it to Mrs. Howard Deveril.

Oval face; delicate, well-cut features; mobile expression; a complexion milk and pink, and velvety as a sun-warmed peach; eyes full, dreamy, seductive; lashes that were silken fringes, and red golden-bronze hair, completed the adornment of a countenance that was perfection.

What wonder that, while its owner regarded the children, Herbert Cunningham—a couple of years her senior, and tall, broad-shouldered, and handsome, too—regarded her.

"How happy the darlings are! How thankful they must be to generous Sir Hereward!" she proceeded. "But, though late, I must not be idle. I must help. Ha, ha! that was the condition upon which we adults were asked, was not it?"

And the bronze lashes were raised to let the shining gray eyes rest upon her companion.

"That is, I believe, the condition in most cases," was the answer, while the speaker's curly brown head was bent nearer. "But all rules have exception, and you, dear Mrs. Deveril, are the exception here. We feel sufficiently grateful for your honoring this *fete* of the innocents by your presence alone."

"That's flattery, nothing less, and I will not listen to it," laughed the lady, thereby disclosing two rows of exquisitely pearly teeth. "I intend to make up for lost time, and be very busy. Only," with a suspicion of plainness, "will you—dare I ask you to keep by me awhile, just to show me the way? Unfortunately, I know"—a sigh, and droop of the long lashes—"so little about children. Dare I confess it, at one time it made me angry to look upon them; their laughter drove me mad."

Mrs. Howard Deveril had a sad, and something of a romantic past. She had married for love, and eighteen months of unalloyed happiness had ensued. For economy's sake, however, Mr. Deveril had resided in the south of France; and, one afternoon, while boating on the Mediterranean, his boat was capsized by a sudden squall, and he drowned, not only in sight of land, but in sight of his wife, who was on the beach awaiting his return.

The shock produced brain fever, during which an infant was born. It lived long enough for the mother to look upon it, to know it, and then faded away.

The bereaved wife and widow was for a long time inconsolable; her enemies declaring that her grief was much added to by the fact of the straitened circumstances in which her husband had left her.

His relatives, however, together allowed her an income while she remained unwedded; and certainly, she recovered rapidly after this, and directly the prescribed period of mourning had elapsed, re-entered society, keeping her widowhood and childlessness to use on occa-

sions, as above, for little effective touches only, it being no part of her desire to remain single.

Fate had brought her to Weirbourne, and Fate had brought her acquainted with Sir Hereward Cunningham, a widower with an only son.

Fate did more than this. It speedily showed her that she had won the admiration of both father and son.

"Which shall I take?" she reflected. "Bah!" (with a little joyous laugh) "Sir Hereward is sixty. Who would wed December when they could have May? Besides, wedding the father, when he dies I shall be put aside as Dowager Lady Cunningham; while, if I wed Herbert, when once Lady Cunningham, I shall remain in power all my days, or give place only to my own children."

So the glances shot from the beautiful Mrs. Deveril's eyes of gray into his of blue had a meaning in them deeper than coquetry—a meaning Herbert Cunningham apparently responded to.

"If the sight of children gives you pain—if their laughter distresses you," he said, earnestly, as she lightly placed her gloved hand on the arm he had extended, "why subject yourself to it? Let us, Dear Mrs. Deveril, go in another direction. Their feasting is nearly over."

"No, no!" she interrupted, her hand spasmodically, as it seemed, tightening on his arm a second. "You are very kind. But I am foolish! I must—I will get over it! Don't be frightened!" (with a winning laugh); "I shall not make a scene—I am better than I used to be!"

Mrs. Deveril proving resolute, together they crossed the lawn to the largest marquee. People observing these two, the down-dropped lashes of the lady, the bent, earnest head of the gentleman, would have certainly put it down as a "case." Yet Herbert Cunningham said little; but to the widow the shine of his eyes was sufficiently eloquent.

Still, in trials of broken promises the mute language of the eyes has never been held binding proof.

"Surely," reflected Mrs. Deveril, "he will speak to-day. I see a proposal on his lips."

On entering the canvas-striped marquee the children were still busy with cake and tea, while aristocratic, well-born attendants flitted about them, growing somewhat weary.

"A charming, a most exquisite scene of innocent enjoyment!" again remarked Mrs. Deveril, as, standing just within the canvas opening, her head inclined toward her companion, she looked on the bustle, "quite a picture."

Their entrance had been observed by two persons—Sir Hereward and pretty May Rivers, the curate's daughter. The countenance of the former flushed and contracted with a frown; that of the latter grew suddenly pallid, even to the lips, before she stooped over the child nearest to her to conceal her agitation.

"Now," proceeded Mrs. Deveril, with a winning glance up at her cavalier, not unmarked by the baronet, too far off and too occupied at present to approach, "help me—tell me what I ought to do. Hand the cake? Let them eat as much as they like? Heavens, in what request the parish doctor will be to-morrow!—Come, please don't leave me until I am fairly afloat."

Herbert Cunningham appeared not to have the least intention of leaving her. Loyally he kept by the widow's side, aiding her, laughing, chatting, apparently having no eyes but for her; certainly not for May Rivers, nor the angry, jealous glances of Sir Hereward.

Yes, the baronet loved Mrs. Deveril with all the intensity, we might say absurdity, of an elderly man, and was jealous of his handsome son.

Before a quarter of an hour he had overcome all obstacles arising from his position as host, and approached the widow.

"A thousand, thousand welcomes!" he exclaimed, bowing in courtly fashion over her

white, soft hand. "How for the last quarter of an hour have I been envying Bertie monopolizing the Queen of Beauty! Lucky dog! But every dog must have his day, and mine has arrived. Bert, Miss Ada Campbell has been inquiring for you. She wants your help. You know she believes—ha, ha!—that you can do everything. I said I would send you—be off! I will take the honor, the pleasure of attending upon Mrs. Deveril myself."

Mrs. Howard Deveril controlled her annoyance to a move of her pretty lips, while her eyes rested lingeringly on the young man before he turned away.

"Poor Ada Campbell!" she thought, with mocking pity. "And poor Sir Hereward! Can any man be so stupidly vain as to imagine that gray hairs can compete with brown? Let him be content with being my father-in-law—a proper position. Still, he is Herbert's father, so I must be kind. Herbert—Bertie—Bert! What a pretty name! What fond abbreviations!"

So mused the widow, mechanically assisting the child insatiable to cake, and smiling, though only half hearing the flatteries Sir Hereward whispered in her ear.

Finally, the child insatiable became satiated, and a general stampede was made to the swings and the lawns, where the elders were organizing numerous games.

Mrs. Deveril sighed with relief. To say the least, the child insatiable, whether for cake or play, was decidedly a bore. In the confusion of leaving tents the widow would have stolen away from her companion, but Sir Hereward was not to be quitted.

His manner, his compliments, were more than ever impressive. They frequently conveyed a meaning which Mrs. Deveril could not fail to understand, though she pretended not to, but threw up word-barriers like a skillful sapper.

Meanwhile, her eyes sought Herbert. He was everywhere, the mirth and soul of this or that group of children.

"But," with a sigh, "he is not with Ada Campbell! That is a comfort!"

Finally, the shades of evening began to darken beneath the old oaks.

The happy, weary-footed little guests were to form in procession, and chanting a song of praise to their host, take their departure, a fact that necessitated the presence of the Baronet.

"Never mind! He'll be as anxious to look for me as I for him," smiled the widow, who, to avoid falling again into the Baronet's clutches, had slipped into a shadowy alley. "I wonder what Sir Hereward will think when he knows I have accepted Herbert? Dear Bertie!" thus ran her meditations. "He'll be awfully furious at first. Why, he has as good as proposed a dozen times himself to-day! Perhaps he'll refuse to keep Bertie. He can't disinherit him, for, of course, the place is entailed. Bertie and I must get on as well as we can until Sir Hereward's time has come to quit this mundane sphere, then Lady Cunningham shall enter into her estate. Really, Gwen, you are a clever woman!" laughing low and musically. "When you came here, you went in for the son or the father—would have been glad of either—and may now take your choice. Both are at your feet!"

As the last words were uttered, Mrs. Deveril halted abruptly.

There were some people talking at the other side of the hawthorn hedge.

Who could it be? She fancied all but her had gone to the terrace to see the march-past of the infantry. She had better retreat noiselessly, not being desirous for company; and, no doubt the persons, probably a pair of lovers, equally wished to remain undisturbed.

Gathering her soft muslin skirts about her, she had already taken a step in retreat, when one of the voices exclaimed, "Nay, you should not, even by a look, mistrust me. You know my heart must ever be faithful to you; and

you are aware of the reason I pay this seeming court."

Mrs. Deveril's countenance flushed, then paled. Her eyes dilated, her lips trembled. Then swiftly moving forward, she strove to peer through the hedge.

She was successful, and saw that her ears had not deceived her. The speaker was Herbert Cunningham, and it was May Rivers, the curate's daughter, to whom he was speaking.

CHAPTER II.

A PROPOSAL—THE WIDOW TRIUMPHS.

WHEN Mrs. Deveril recognized the two, her hands clenched, her lips tightened, a dangerous light sprung into her eyes.

The pair stood together in the twilight shadows of a wide-spread beech. Herbert Cunningham's arm was about May's slender waist; her hands rested one on each of his broad shoulders; her fair, sweet face was lifted; her eyes, with love's own sunshine in them, were raised to his, which met them with a life's passion.

Lovers, indeed! Were they only lovers? She was a poor curate's daughter; he, Sir Hereward's heir!

Surely, if she listened, she should ascertain?

Recalling Herbert Cunningham's melting glances, Mrs. Deveril felt not above eaves-dropping.

"Of course, Bertie, I know the reason," said May. "Did I not—oh, my darling, I think my heart would break! The cause may be a just one; still I do not like it! Not only does it pain me—foolishly pain me, Bertie, if you will—to see you by her side, receiving and answering her smiles; but the part you yourself play does not seem honorable to you nor just to her. Imagine if"—and the clear eyes expanded with fond affection—"she really loves you! Why not? I could easily imagine it!"

"You are a dear, silly little pet!" responded the young man, clasping her to him, and looking fondly down upon her before he pressed on her lips a kiss that went like a dagger to the watcher's heart. "Love! Mrs. Deveril does not know it; with her it goes by the name of self-interest. I tell you, May, I read her character directly ill fate threw her across our path. Cunningham was a fine place, supported easily by a fine income. She was fascinating, beautiful, so laid her nets accordingly for either the father or the son. The younger man best suited her; but he failing, the elder would serve!"

"Oh, Bertie!"

Mrs. Deveril's filbert nails pierced her delicate pink palms as she listened. Rage boiled in her heart—the more fiercely because Herbert Cunningham's words were true.

It is no pleasant thing to find our cleverly-plotted schemes have been unmasked.

"You look horrified, May. But be certain I am right."

"But how long do you intend—how long will it be necessary to make love to her?"

"I do not make love to her. I only look it. Well, as to its duration, I can't say; but I fancy the end must be near."

"Far nearer than you think!" muttered Mrs. Deveril.

"My foolish father is infatuated with her, and jealous of me. If I can only prove to him what is her plot, however, the possession of Cunningham by any means, he has enough wisdom left not to be duped. At least I hope he has, or Heaven knows what would become of us! That woman as an enemy would be dangerous, pitiless!"

A smile of satisfaction, as if the words conveyed a compliment, passed over the widow's features, and, in the fast-waning light, she nodded her head significantly.

"All seems very wretched, very miserable," murmured May. "Bertie, I cannot help it; it makes me sad. I do not like it."

"How could you, poor love?" And tenderly he drew her so close that her head sunk on his breast as its natural, its legitimate pillow.

"But for Mrs. Deveril's arrival, I would, trust me, have owned our marriage to my father long before this; feeling aware that, as his only son, the only being he then loved, I might easily have won his pardon. But now it would be to cast him into the arms of this designing widow. Then, sweet wife, what would become of us?"

"His wife!" gasped the listener. "A secret marriage! Oh, this is a lucky hearing for me! Poor fools, how completely are they in my power!"

"Oh, darling!—oh, love!—have I thus so nearly ruined you?" cried the girl, passionately throwing her arms round his neck, and clinging to him. "Oh, Bertie, if harm should come to you—poverty, disinheritance through me—never could I forgive myself!"

"You, darling? You bring other than happiness? Nonsense, May! If the worst were to come, I should hold myself rich beyond measure in possessing you. But these are idle fears. We have only to keep our union secret."

"But, oh, my love, in a few months that will be impossible; or—or I must leave home!"

The trembling, whispered words, the blushing face averted on his bosom, revealed the truth.

"Good Heavens! is it so?" cried Herbert Cunningham.

Then the whole heart of the strong man went out to the weak woman, and he clasped her to his breast with a new love, a new affection throbbing in his veins.

In all their lives, this moment—the interview altogether—stood out clear and happy in their recollection. They did well to remember it, for it was the beginning of the end. They might have taken the ebon night falling about them as symbolic.

At this moment voices were heard, merely servants' voices, as their owners were busy clearing the marquees; but even by those people the heir and his young wife desired not to be detected.

"Let us return, love," whispered Herbert. "We shall be missed, and just at this time must not create suspicion. I have also promised to escort Mrs. Deveril home."

Emerging from the beech-shade, they walked rapidly over the lawn, and disappeared. Then, not until then, the listener moved, and made her way, with slow step and bowed head, but busy brain, back to the Castle.

Like a big, ugly blot on a fair page, one resolve dominated all else—revenge. She had vowed it, and, better still, knew she could accomplish it. He, Herbert, should find how hard and pitiless she could be.

"Oh!" she cried, with a shiver in her tones which ran through her whole frame, "I could kill him! At least, I'll ruin him as far as I am able. But the entail—that miserable entail!"

As Mrs. Deveril, quitting the alley, swept gracefully, slowly across the lawn, a gentleman descending the steps of the terrace came quickly to meet her.

A cold, pleased smile shone in the widow's eyes as she recognized Sir Hereward.

In youth he must have been remarkably handsome, for the aristocratic features were so yet, though the hair was iron-gray, and Time had drawn his mark about the corners of the mouth and eyes; yet in the latter beamed, as they rested upon Mrs. Deveril, a fire to which love gave almost a youthful ardor.

"At last, then, I have found you!" he exclaimed. "I have been seeking you everywhere. I feared that perhaps the children had wearied you, and that you had found a pair of angel wings to fly homeward."

"That is not a compliment, Sir Hereward," smiled the lady, accepting the proffered arm, and leaning rather upon it; "for only the wicked would fly from Paradise."

"Paradise!"—looking, or trying to look, into her eyes. "Do you, then, consider Cunningham in that light?"

"In what other could I? The old Castle is a gem in itself. To me it is a casket of marvels. It carries a mediæval history on its gray

walls," proceeded Mrs. Deveril, in low-voiced, musical enthusiasm.

"Old, indeed," laughed the baronet. "There are stairs and passages—secret ones, of course—crumbling with age, they say. I would have them renovated, but I am told it would ruin the appearance of the other portions."

"And I'm sure you would not be Gothic enough for that, Sir Hereward. I can imagine how proud you must be of the ancient place and slumberous grounds. I should be, if"—a very faint sigh—"they were mine. Eve could never have erred if her Paradise had been like this."

The opportunity offered by these words the baronet did not pass over. Halting, he placed his hand within the little one resting upon his arm, bent his head, and remarked, "Dear Mrs. Deveril, will you make it yours, and at the same time make me the happiest, most to be envied man on earth? Will you be my wife?"

Ah, the triumphant thrill that quivered through the widow's frame! It made her accents naturally tremulous as she murmured, "Oh, Sir Hereward, I never expected—expected this!"

Faintly she strove to remove her hand, but his too surely imprisoned it.

"Have I offended you?" he pleaded. "I know I am older than you—old enough to be your father instead of your husband. Yet, my love you shall find as sincere—nay, probably more so than a younger man's. At my age affection is no ephemeral feeling; it grips the heart as the ivy the forest oak."

"Oh, Sir Hereward, are these apologies necessary? Is love to be gauged by years, murmured the siren. "Offended! How could I be? I am overwhelmed by the honor you would do me."

"Honor! 'Tis I who am honored. I place myself, and all that is mine, at your feet. Only—only say that you care for me."

His voice shook, also his frame, as he leaned toward her. She stood with bowed head and swelling bosom before him, silent. Then, abruptly, as with a little shivering cry, "Oh, is it true, Sir Hereward, is it true? Am I awake? Is it a dream?"

"It is serious truth to me. At my age rejection would be difficult to support," he rejoined, agitatedly. "Can you care for me sufficient to—to be mine?"

A pause; then two white hands were tremblingly extended, a pair of large gray eyes shining timidly were raised, and like a whisper came the answer, "Oh, Sir Hereward, have you not seen that which, try as I would, I could not altogether hide—that I—I—love you?"

The accents died musically away as the baronet, taking the extended hands in a rapture of joy, drew their owner to his bosom.

"Gwendoline—my wife!"

Ten minutes later they stood at the foot of the terrace, preparing to ascend. The castle was full of light, but its rays hardly reached them.

"It is a grand old place, remarked the baronet, with justifiable pride. "You are proud of it too, now, Gwendoline, for it is yours."

"I am prouder of you, for you will be always mine."

"And so will Cunningham. It shall never have another mistress, dear love."

"Oh, yes," she laughed, gayly. "Dear Bertie will marry, and in time, as of course it should be, set up his Lares and Penates here, while I, the Dowager, and mine, like aliens, shall fold up our tents and silently steal away. That is the result of entail."

"Aliens!" broke in Sir Hereward, with asperity, recollecting his jealousy. "Master Bertie must look to himself, if he has thus regarded you and yours, dear Gwendoline. But that is an absurdity. As to the entail, you mistake; Cunningham is not entailed."

"Not?" ejaculated Mrs. Deveril, in quick surprise.

"No. It was up to the coming over of the

Prince of Orange. The then baronet, a loyal Protestant, was heart and soul for William, as was his younger son. Unfortunately, however, his elder was a staunch supporter of James. There was a grievous quarrel between the father and son, and the former, a hard, stern man, by means of a large sum and Court influence got the entail destroyed, since when the ruling Cunningham has had the power to will it to whom he pleased."

"How strange!" laughed the widow, lightly. "Then, if you liked—as the saying goes—you could cut dear Herbert off with a shilling?"

"Yes, exactly; and—shall I let you into a secret?—I felt very much inclined to do so this evening."

"This evening!"

"When I saw him by your side—when I was jealous of him."

"Surely, you were never that! Did you not read me better than that? I like him, of course, for is he not your son?"

"I see I was blind, thank Heaven! But the present joy more than equals the past misery," laughed Sir Hereward, as they ascended the steps, while Mrs. Deveril was thinking:

"Not entail! What an escape I have had!"

As they stepped through the French windows into the drawing-room, they came upon Herbert. Perhaps it was a sense of pride to show how age had triumphed over youth that urged the Baronet so quickly to announce the fact, but he said, "Bertie, the last half-hour has made me the most to be envied man on earth. Let me introduce to you your future step-mother and my wife."

Mrs. Deveril made a little deprecating, bashful movement, and inclined her head. But once the future mother and son's eyes met. It seemed a revelation. Herbert had gone pale. He bit his lip under his mustache. Nevertheless, he managed to bow, saying in a tone the cynicism of which the Baronet imagined he could account for easily, "I congratulate you, sir." Then, turning on his heel, he added, mentally, "Ruined! Poor May! She hates me—I saw it in her eye. Could she have discovered anything? If so, as I have said, she will prove hard and pitiless, even unto death!"

He was right.

CHAPTER III.

THE ANONYMOUS LETTER—DISINHERITED.

The society of which Cunningham Castle was the ruling center very speedily was startled by two equally amazing pieces of news, one following rapidly on the heels of the other, as thunder succeeds lightning.

The first was that Sir Hereward, on the evening of the children's *fete*, had proposed to and been accepted by Mrs. Howard Deveril.

The other, that Herbert Cunningham had been secretly wedded to May Rivers, the curate's daughter, and had, in consequence, been banished the castle.

Rumor, many-tongued, whispered it; but confirmatory evidence soon followed.

It was stated that a terrible scene had taken place between the father and son, and that finally the latter had quitted the paternal roof, enraged, indignant, banished, though Mrs. Deveril had gone on her knees to entreat forgiveness for him.

For a wonder, rumor told the tale with truth, devoid of exaggeration. Even it was not wrong in saying that Sir Hereward's passion had been augmented by jealousy, for all had seen the serio-comedy which had been taking place—a comedy that now promised to have a tragic ending.

Late on the afternoon succeeding the *fete* an anonymous letter had reached the Baronet. The envelope was poor and smirched, the calligraphy that of an uneducated servant-maid. The contents, in grammar equally bad as the spelling, informed him of his son's secret union with May Rivers.

The Baronet had read, confounded. He would not believe it—he could not. Had not *that* before his very eyes made love to Mrs.

Deveril? Never would he have done that as May Rivers's husband. He never would have dared so to insult her, the widow, so soon to be his, Sir Hereward's wife.

Yes, that was it. Now her honor was his; an insult to her was an insult to him.

And May Rivers, too! To wed her, if he really had, the child of a half-starved parson, a Sunday-school teacher and parish drudge—he, Herbert Cunningham, his heir! Heir! No; that must be seen to. The thing was preposterous—unheard of. When Herbert returned—he had been absent all day—he, his father, would force the truth from him.

Never had the Baronet been so angry—never in a state to be more easily worked upon. The matter so absorbed him, that he forgot the appointment he had made with Mrs. Deveril to show her over the Castle, and was only reminded of it by a footman announcing her presence in the drawing-room.

Sir Hereward felt he would need a grave excuse for so unloverlike a proceeding; and thought rightly none could be graver than the truth.

Smoothing his ruffled countenance, he hastened to her. She met him with a reproving smile.

"What a squire of dames!" she laughed. "I waited for you ten minutes, then came on alone! I had half a mind to go back."

"Thank Heaven, dearest, you did not!" he answered, first kissing her hand, then her cheek. "How can I best sue for forgiveness? I will, if you wish it, do so at your feet, or perform any penance you may command, though when you hear the cause I fancy you will pardon me. The truth is, I have to-day received some bad news; but no, I cannot credit it."

"Oh, I am so sorry! Pray do not think of my idle words!" she exclaimed, in thrilling accents, her large, gray eyes full of compassionate sympathy. Then, taking a step nearer, resting one hand hesitatingly on his shoulder, looking timidly into his face, she added, fondly, "May I know, Hereward? True, I am not your wife yet; but my heart is as much yours as if I were. As I am sure you would wish me to share your joys; may I not share your griefs? Oh, you look worried! Would, dearest love, besides hearing, I might aid you!"

Such pretty words would thrill a young lover's heart. How much more so one of sixty! The Baronet clasped her in his arms, and passionately looking down on the silken fringes now veiling the eyes, thought, "And that villain, a married man, dared insult her with his love!" Then he added, "My darling, if my anonymous informant has spoken truth, then it is out of anybody's power to aid. Let us be seated, Gwendoline, and I will tell you."

Mrs. Deveril listened with semblance of deepest interest and in silence until the Baronet spoke of the union; then, starting back in well-acted horror, "Married!" she ejaculated, seeming greatly shocked. "Oh, Sir Hereward, I will not believe it! Herbert is your son, and hence a gentleman. He cannot have acted so basely; he would not have dared!"

Then she stopped in seeming confusion, averting her face.

"Dared what, Gwendoline?"

"No, no; take no heed, pray," she murmured. "I knew not what I said."

"Darling, I cannot be silent. Speak!" urged the Baronet, holding her hand. "Yet why pain you? I know what you would say. Herbert led you to believe he loved you."

"He did, though he never absolutely confessed; yet his looks, his tones, spoke his passion. Oh, Sir Hereward! if my heart had not been otherwise engaged, what a wretched woman I might have been now! I might have given him my affection. But, oh, no, no! this cannot be!" she proceeded, bursting into tears. "Yet, if it were, can you wonder, though he is your son, that I feel grieved—insulted?"

"Gwendoline, he shall pay dearly for it, trust me!" exclaimed the infatuated Baronet.

"Not on my account, I entreat you, dear-

est!" she interrupted, placing her hand on his arm. "Rather let me, soon to be his mother, as he will be my son—my dear son—plead for him. I can—I will forgive. Hereward, I will love him for your sake."

Mrs. Deveril knew perfectly how to pour oil on fire.

The Baronet was not blind to his sixty years, nor the fact that in everybody's eyes a union between this lovely woman, who looked younger than she was, and his handsome boy would have been far more natural.

The idea of her loving Herbert as a son was not an agreeable idea to the young man's elderly and jealous father.

Mrs. Deveril knew it, and went on: "But how selfish I am to think of myself! It is you, Hereward, who need all the sympathy. To be so cruelly, so unfilially treated! Herbert, just for the sake of a pretty face, to marry a girl like that! He, your heir!"

"By Heaven, he is not my heir!" cried the Baronet, starting up in his wrath. "For this I disinherit him! Let him keep himself, or let the curate keep him. But it may not be true. I hate anonymous letters. Hark!" as a quick, firm step sounded in the hall; "here he comes. Thank goodness, we shall have the truth, at any rate."

Mrs. Deveril rose, with a little cry of alarm. "Oh, Sir Hereward! I cannot be present. It would not be right; we will meet later."

Swiftly she crossed the drawing-room, and disappeared behind a satin curtain, which covered a door, as Herbert Cunningham entered.

Did he notice the shaking of that curtain? His eyes were in that direction. Did he suspect who had passed through?

"You have come most opportunely, Herbert," remarked the father, with effort controlling his excitement. "I desire to speak to you on a subject which has caused me considerable uneasiness."

The son looked curiously at the other. The reflex of the storm yet was on his features.

"It has come too soon," thought Herbert. Then, aloud, deferentially, "My time is yours, father. I perceive something has troubled you. What is it?"

"This." And with one hand Sir Hereward indicated the letter in the other. "Herbert, I put no trust in anonymous communications, so shall accept your word if you deny the truth of this. 'Is'—his eyes fixed steadily on the young fellow—"what this letter states true or false?"

With deep misgiving, Herbert Cunningham, taking the paper, read it. As he did so, he started violently. Then his brow contracted, his teeth bit his lips, all color left his face.

With rising wrath the Baronet watched.

"Well?" he demanded, when he saw his son turn the page. "There is no more. Is it true or false?"

Herbert Cunningham raised his head. He was very pale, but calm. His glance met Sir Hereward's steadily.

"It is true," he answered, clearly. "May is my wife. It is a pity the information should have reached you through such a source. I would rather my own lips had told you."

"Source?" ejaculated the Baronet, with difficulty keeping his fury in curb. "You mean you know the writer of this?"

"I do; though how the knowledge has reached her I cannot imagine. Mrs. Howard Deveril wrote this letter!"

"Mrs. Howard Deveril?" cried Sir Hereward, the blood rushing to his forehead. "It is false! She was in ignorance of your folly till I informed her of it."

"It is true, sir; for no other than she exists who would have sought to do me this injury."

"Have a care, sir! Do not malign a woman you have already so basely insulted. What interest could your low amours have to her?"

"That, sir, of revenge."

"Revenge?"

"No less. Listen to me, father. I may have done wrong—I have, I confess it; but, partly, it was for your sake. At any rate, in

common justice, you will hear my extenuation?" exclaimed Herbert, with sudden earnestness and force.

"Speak, sir; I do not refuse you that. At least one thing you cannot deny—May Rivers is your wife?"

"She is, father. For all Cunningham I would not deny it."

"It is well," interrupted the Baronet, halting in his angry pacing: "for that, sir, is the price you will pay for your mad infatuation for a pretty face."

"Did dear May only possess that, then would the price be too much; but she is as good and true as she is beautiful!" exclaimed the young husband, with enthusiasm. "If you did but know her, as one day I trust you will—"

"Never!"

"You are angry now—justly angry, owing to the source from which you have learned the truth; yet I will hope, knowing that your heart is not so stern and pitiless as you believe. That my secret marriage was a grave error I confess. Nay, hear me! It took place before I left last for college. May had many suitors, two of which her father strongly favored. With the fear of lovers, I could not rest until I had put a barrier to her union with another, which nothing but my death could destroy. The time was too short to obtain your consent. I knew, until you were better acquainted with May, you would never consent."

"Never!" interpolated the Baronet.

He was again pacing the room, his hands behind his back, his fingers twitching convulsively. He had given Herbert permission to speak. He listened with little interruption, for he had already pronounced the verdict, and had his son spoken until doomsday he could not then have altered it. As it happened, he made matters worse.

"We were married privately," proceeded Bertie. "I went to college for my last term. Eagerly I looked forward to its conclusion, determining when we again met to tell you all. But, to commemorate my return, you gave a large party, and among the guests was a stranger—Mrs. Howard Deveril."

"What!" broke in Sir Hereward, wheeling short around; "have you the audacity to mention her—her to whom you, a married man, dared to make love? You see, sir, I am acquainted with all."

"No doubt from Mrs. Deveril's own lips."

"As my future wife, I forbid you to mention her name."

"I must; for of all this wretched misery she is the willful cause. Stay!"—as the Baronet was about to speak—"you have promised to hear me."

"I have—proceed!" said Sir Hereward, clenching his teeth, and throwing himself on a chair.

"The evening had not elapsed before I read Mrs. Deveril thoroughly, and the plan she had in her mind."

Herbert paused; but the Baronet looked at him with a smile and an air of complacency which his son knew boded more danger than his wrath. He continued:

"This plan was to become mistress of Cunningham, by wedding either the father or the son. Love was no consideration to her, for she would have wedded either. She is beautiful, fascinating; hence was powerful. I saw even then you were not indifferent to her attractions. Father, had she been worthy of your affection," proceeded the son, fervently, "I swear by Heaven I would not have acted as I did; but I accepted the attentions she speedily, as you know, lavished on me. I seemed to return them for your sake—to save you from becoming the prey of a beautiful but designing woman."

Sir Hereward's lip contracted sharply, but he remained silent. Though Cunningham, he was aware, was in the balance, Herbert was now determined to tell all. At least, he would try to open his father's eyes.

"I am telling you no new thing when I say I soon found favor with her. Inwardly I

blushed at the part I was playing, but cunning can only be met by cunning; and I wished to show to you what this woman's love was worth. I hoped to devise some innocent means of disclosing it to you; for I knew I had but to propose to be accepted. It sounds like egotism; it is truth. Yesterday, by word and look, she gave me fifty opportunities of doing so before you sent me to Ada Campbell. The *fete* kept us apart after that. When the children left, I had a conversation with my wife in the grounds. That conversation, I believe now, Mrs. Deveril overheard. She learned that I, even as she, had been plotting; but, unfortunately, the ball was in her hands. Five minutes later you must have met her, proposed, and been accepted. The sequel, sir, is yonder letter. Every line is eloquent of a malignant woman. This is her revenge, and to the grave she will be relentless. Would to Heaven, father, you could read her as well as I have read her!"

"Have you finished?" inquired the Baronet, in a firm but hard voice.

"I have; and what I have said I swear is truth," said the young man, with emotion.

"Father, your face tells me to what little effect I have spoken. But, I entreat you, pause! Reflect before you utter the words you are impatient to speak. I am your only son, your only child, and have been a dutiful one save in a single case. Think of the strong ties of affection which have united us until now. Oh, shall a woman part us forever? No, no; think, sir, of my mother!"

The Baronet had risen slowly from his chair; not a muscle of his face moved.

"Not one—it is two women who part us forever," he said. "Mark me, *forever*! You have made your choice; follow it. Go! leave this house at once; and never, while I live, shall you again put foot in it, or my curse will rest upon you!"

Almost automatically raising his arm, he pointed to the door.

At the same moment the satin curtain was dashed aside, and Mrs. Deveril, radiantly beautiful and in tears, rushing in, threw herself at Sir Hereward's feet.

"No, no!" she cried, clasping his knees and lifting her wet eyes; "not banishment! I cannot bear it. Let not me be the cause. For my sake, forgive—pardon him. He has sinned, but is repentant! He is your son, dear Hereward, and I am merely—"

"My wife!" exclaimed the Baronet, resting his hand fondly on her head.

"Rise, madam!" broke in Herbert, hardly able—indeed, scarcely trying—to modify his indignation and scorn. "At least, you and I understand each other. Your hypocrisy and eavesdropping have gained you the victory; be content. Father, farewell! I obey you, praying a time may speedily arrive when you and I—father and son—may be again united. It is not Cunningham, so much as your love, I regret. My love you still possess, and"—with a glance at the still kneeling widow—"pity."

Then he swung round, and, without another word, quitted the apartment.

"Oh, Hereward, dearest," sobbed Mrs. Deveril, piteously, plaintively, "do I deserve this?" He raised her, pressing her to his breast, kissing her lips.

"My darling, he answered, "some men, for their own purposes, would malign angels. Henceforth I have no son. In all the world I have but you to care for and love. Wait! He is a fool who needlessly delays important matters, even for a second."

Crossing to a davenport, he wrote a note hurriedly, sealed it, then rung the bell.

The widow watched him curiously, anxiously.

"See that this letter is delivered at once," he said, on the footman appearing; adding, as the man left, "It is to summon my lawyer. Gwendoline, I will not sleep until my will is made disinheriting my ungrateful son, and rendering you, dearest, safe."

"Oh, Hereward!"

And the widow dropped her face in her cambric handkerchief, to hide the smile of triumph that passed over it. Hers had been the victory, indeed.

That night, Herbert Cunningham started for London with his young wife, ignorant—though the fact would not have surprised him—that at the same minute the will was being signed which disinherited him, and made Mrs. Deveril sole inheritrix.

A month later wedding-bells rung their merry peal, and the widow, leaning on her elderly bridegroom's arm, entered the castle as Lady Cunningham.

CHAPTER IV.

FATE PLAYS INTO LADY GWENDOLINE'S HANDS.

Our story demands that the reader should leap over a space of five years.

Summer has gone; autumn has placed her artistic hand upon the ancient Cunningham woods, making them redder and glow like fire beneath her touch.

Decay is within the castle, as without. The year is dying, and Sir Hereward is stretched upon the bed from which he will never rise alive.

How those five years have passed with him there is not space minutely to inquire. Whether that second wedded life had not answered quite the expectations he had formed; whether there had been moments when, despite all efforts, the truth had forced itself in upon him that his son had been right, and he wrong, there is no need to speculate. If there had been regrets, he kept them, as proud men will, to himself.

But certain it is, perhaps because aware that his health was failing, his heart had long been yearning for his son—yearning in secret, for he had not ventured to make known this yielding to Lady Gwendoline.

As usual, in the union of June and December, it was the strong, healthful, self-reliant June that ruled. Not one in all Cunningham society would have said Sir Hereward's will had to be that of his beautiful wife. The men considered him a lucky old fellow; the ladies, that no husband could have so attentive and considerate a helpmate.

Yet the Baronet knew otherwise. Whether or not it arose from that disinclination to contend or assert authority which so often accompanies failing vital power, certain it is that Lady Gwendoline had long governed. Indeed, though he hardly could explain it, he was rather frightened of her, especially on the subject of Bertie. Thus he kept his longings to himself, waiting a favorable opportunity to speak; for see his son he felt he must. Once he had hinted his desire, and had been readily answered.

"Of course, Hereward, it must be as you please. No doubt I fall far short of what he can be to you. Have him here, by all means. Only, considering the flattering opinion he entertains of me, while he is in the Castle you will excuse my leaving it."

"You, Gwendoline! As if I could permit that! Well, well, say no more about it now. In time, I hope, you will pardon him."

"As he has already!" reflected Lady Cunningham, furiously.

The conversation had dropped there, but its subject ever haunted Gwendoline's mind.

The Baronet had no need to speak. She knew perfectly well he had pardoned Bertie—that he was hungering to summon him back. In that case, how long would that will, which made her mistress of everything, last? How long before it would it be annulled by another, reinstating Herbert in his rights?

"He shall never return here if I can help it," she reflected, "and no other will than that shall ever be made."

To prevent this, her affectionate care so increased that she scarcely permitted Sir Hereward to be ten minutes alone.

Six months later, two fits following rapidly one on the other, laid the Baronet on his death-bed.

"Gwendoline," he said one morning, after the doctor's visit, "it is no use either you or he trying to hide it from me. I know that my end is near. I must see Herbert—dear Bertie! Surely you will suffer that I may say farewell to my son?"

"Oh, dearest," in tones of fond reproach, "you know not how you pain me! I will send for him this instant!"

"Thank you—thank you! Heaven bless you, Gwendoline!" And, tears of gratitude in his eyes and voice, he pressed her hand. "Darling, you cannot tell how I crave to see my boy!"

"You shall. I will telegraph at once. He will be here, no doubt, before to-morrow. But I forgot"—and a perplexed, anxious expression came into her eyes—"his address. We do not know it. How, then, send?"

A conscious blush passed over the dying man's countenance.

"I have it, Gwendoline," he said. "Something seemed to whisper me that a time might come like this, and I wished to be prepared. You will find it in the left drawer of the escritoire."

A blue tinge, unpleasant to see, touched Lady Cunningham's lips and temples, but she said, smiling, "I perceive. You wanted to send him money without my knowing." Then, in a sudden burst of grief, bowing her head on her husband's bosom, "Oh, Hereward! you could not have loved me—no, no—to have feared me thus!"

"Not love you, Gwen? You have been all in all to me, dearest. But I wanted no one to know—not even Bertie. I sent it anonymously, and had it posted in London."

"Forgive me, Hereward," she answered, rising. "If you hid it from me it was my own fault, for I made you think I was pitiless against poor Bertie. By sending this telegram myself, summoning him here, I shall prove otherwise."

Swiftly she crossed to the escritoire.

As she drew forth the envelope bearing Herbert's address, she saw another paper in it, on which were written about half a dozen dates, with sums of money after each.

It was the Baronet's memorandum of what he had sent.

Lady Cunningham crushed it in her hand for later perusal; and, sitting down, filled in a telegram paper. It ran—

"DEAR HERBERT,—

"I grieve to say your father is not well. He longs to see you. Pray come at once. Forget the past as sincerely as do he and I. Come!"

"Thank you, Gwen," said the Baronet. "You cannot tell, dear, how happy you have made me!"

"And myself," she smiled, going back to write the address; but it could not have been hurry nor carelessness that caused her so to change it that no telegraph-office in all London could possibly have hit upon the right one.

"I will take it myself," she said. "It is a fine evening; the walk will do me good; and then, dearest, we shall know that there is no mistake."

Sir Hereward readily agreeing, her ladyship summoned the nurse, put on her bonnet and shawl, and, refusing any attendant, set out for the town.

She was half set before she returned. The groups of cedars on the crest of the hill—to which they gave the name—stood out in inky masses against the red background.

Lady Cunningham had been unavoidably detained; so, to gain time, turning from the road before reaching the lodge, she took a path leading through a wooded, retired portion of the grounds.

Her pace was rapid; but her thoughts still ran on the same string—the telegram.

"Dr. Gotely said to-day it was hardly possible that Hereward could live forty-eight hours. Then care must be taken to keep his mind composed. Before, therefore, the failure of the telegram is discovered—if it ever be—

he will be past rectifying it. My revenge will not be balked. Herbert Cunningham shall never place foot here."

She stopped abruptly, arrested by the heavy tread of a man crushing the rustling leaves a few yards in front of her.

Pausing, she listened. The sound was retreating from her. Who could it be? One of the gardeners?

To ascertain, she hurried forward, peering through the tree-trunks, for under the masses of foliage twilight already reigned. Soon, however, she halted once more, a startled cry on her lip, her color fled.

The man had his back to her, but she recognized him instantly. It was Herbert Cunningham himself.

One moment she stood confounded, speechless, at this failure of her plans. What should she do?

In a second she had decided.

Clothing her features in a timid, anxious expression, quickening her steps, she called, nervously, "Herbert!"

At the sound he turned hastily round.

As his glance rested on the speaker, it grew as frigid, as cold as ice.

Not waiting for him, she said, "You have come, Herbert. Oh, how I have wished it—prayed for it! Surely Providence has sent you. But this hour I have sent a telegram summoning you."

"You?" he could not help ejaculating, discrediting.

"Oh, Herbert," almost humbly, "you have been cruel to me—have misunderstood and wronged me! In pity, do not, at such a time, continue to do so!"

The young man regarded her distrustfully.

"My father is ill—I have heard so," he said, coldly. "He has sent a telegram? He wishes to see me? Good Heaven! what do you mean?" he added, as Lady Cunningham, slightly shaking her head, averted her face.

"He has not sent. He expresses no wish to see you, Herbert. It is I who have sent—who thought you should be here."

"Not see me!—and he so ill? Lady Cunningham, I will see him! No one shall prevent me!" he cried.

"Go! Try!" she rejoined. "I, Herbert, will not hinder you. The path to the Castle is open to you as to me. Only, if you would save yourself from failure, insult, and humiliation, I entreat you to hear me first."

She had drawn back from him, and stood quietly in the path.

Amazed, halting, he regarded her curiously.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"That you should read me rightly at last; that you should know me as your friend, not your foe. I have substantially proved it before now."

"You?" he exclaimed, with a start and flush.

"Yes; but of that hereafter. Now I have sins enough on my own shoulders, I do not doubt, without having to bear the unjust one of separating a father from his son."

"And can you say that this sin is not yours, Lady Cunningham?" he demanded, sternly.

"Yes," came the unshaken reply, "and will prove it. Ah, you shall hear Sir Hereward himself declare it when you meet—for I have vowed that you should meet."

"You! Pardon me, this appears a mystery—a riddle I cannot read."

"Let me do so for you. Listen! When first I married Hereward, my anger was great against you. You may own that I had cause. But when time went on, and no children blessed our union, the fact of your banishment began to weigh upon me. I looked around at the wealth of Cunningham, and knew—for I discovered your address—that you were in comparative poverty. I heard, from Sir Hereward, that he would never receive you back; yet I felt it was cruel, unnatural you should not be at least friends; therefore, at every available opportunity, I began to plead your cause. The result was to bring your father's anger on myself. He was obdurate. My

mention of your name seemed only to make him more so. Therefore—therefore—"her voice fell, her head drooped—"I did the best I could in secret."

"Do you mean," he asked, striding toward her, with emotion, "you anonymously sent me aid?"

She was silent.

"I cannot believe it!"

"Your disbelief, Herbert—my desire that you should read me now aright—forces me to a confession I would willingly have avoided. You received an anonymous inclosure on the 19th March, the 20th September, the 31st of December."

"Heavens!" he ejaculated. "It is true! Forgive me, for I have maligned you indeed! You were generous."

"With what was your own," she laughed, lightly. "But I must hasten on. Your last words, Herbert, give me greater courage. When this illness came upon your father, I again urged reconciliation. Though repulsed, I repeated my entreaties daily. It seemed too awful a thing that he should die at enmity with you, his only son."

"Is he so bad as that?" asked the young man, a quiver in his voice.

"I grieve to say, yes. Herbert, bear it like a man. The doctor fears he cannot survive longer than a fortnight."

"My dear father!" exclaimed the son, dropping his face, with a sob, in his hands. "Oh, I must see him!"

"You shall! Trust in me. When I heard that, I devised a plan, and telegraphed for you at once to come."

"And the plan?"

"To introduce you, notwithstanding his prohibition, secretly into his presence. I say secretly, for the servants—all strangers since you were here—have received imperative orders not to allow you to enter, though they use force."

"Great Heaven!" and the young man began with deep agitation to pace the path. "That such a love as once he bore me could turn to such a hate!"

"Tis but for a few hours now, I am sure, if you will consent to my proposal," said Lady Cunningham, watching her companion as he paced to and fro in the gloom; both too occupied to observe the figure of a woman passing among the trees some little way off, who halted, looked toward them, then disappeared.

"I will agree to anything, so that I may see him, at least, once."

"You shall, but he must not know your intent, or he would refuse. Did you force your way into his presence, the scene—the shock would kill him; and, Herbert, I would not have his death on your hands."

"Good heavens, no!"

"My plan, therefore, is this. Of course you know the old postern at the foot of the west wing?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, when evening closes in I am always alone with Sir Hereward, relieving the nurse until night. To-morrow, soon after the moon has risen, come to the postern. It is never used; but I will take care it shall be opened ready for you. The old passage it gives into is dark—"

"That matters little," broke in the young man. "As a lad, I could traverse it blindfold. It leads, by a flight of stairs and a private passage, to a sliding panel in my father's room."

"Exactly!" cried Lady Cunningham, delighted. "I see you have caught my idea. Ascend to the panel—tap at it—I will be ready to admit you—and success is assured; for Sir Hereward says you resemble your mother—hence he has but to look upon you to forgive."

"A thousand, thousand thanks!" ejaculated the young man, clasping her hand. "How, Lady Cunningham, can I win your pardon for the past?"

"By forgetting it," she answered, promptly. "It will be kinder to us both."

"But why should I not see my father to-night?"

"Because Sir Hereward is now under the influence of a soporific, from which it would be perilous to arouse him, and which may cause him to sleep till dawn, or you would not have found me here. The doctor expects it will make him stronger. Excuse me; are you alone at Weirbourne?—your wife—have you children?"

"I am a widower. My May died eighteen months ago on giving birth to her second child—my only one, for death robbed me of the first."

"Where will you stay until to-morrow?"

"At the inn."

"Will you, do you think, be recognized? It would be better not. Should your presence become known to your father, he might, conceiving it a plot to take advantage of his failing health, give such orders that even I would have to obey them. Illness makes him so irritable."

"That is true. Be assured that none shall recognize me."

"Then farewell, until to-morrow. I need not say be punctual," she remarked, extending her hand. "I must stop no longer. Never since Sir Hereward's illness have I left him so long."

Herbert Cunningham pressed a kiss on her white fingers. It sent a thrill through her, for it recalled that past she never could forget nor forgive.

Again he would have thanked her, but she checked him, and hurried off, among the trees.

"That those anonymous sums so require I should have come from her!" thought the young man, as he watched the twilight shadows close round the graceful, stately figure. "How I have wronged her, or how she has changed!"

At the same time her ladyship's thoughts ran, "What a fortunate meeting! I must not be idle, for there is much to do before to-morrow night. Oh, idiot! to trust a woman he has deceived, whose vanity he has wounded to the quick! Can time ever wipe out that? Never!"

Since that meeting in the grounds, twenty-four hours had gone by. To his nurses it was apparent Sir Hereward was sinking fast.

The feverish restlessness upon him was but hastening the end.

A lamp burned on the table of the oak bed-chamber, the heavy curtains of the bed were drawn back, and the Baronet, supported by pillows, ever turned his haggard eyes from the door to his wife, who stood in the recess of the casement window gazing intently down into the grounds, upon which the moon, ever and anon sailing from some massy pile of wrack, shone with a fitful light before it was again hidden.

"Gwendoline," called the Baronet, fretfully, "an hour must surely have elapsed since you last inquired. Ask again if no news, no telegram has arrived."

"It would be useless, Hereward. From here I command a free view of the road, and no one has approached. Be certain I am right. He has not waited to telegraph, even, but in person is hastening hither."

"In that case, the journey at the most is but nine hours. He would have arrived ere this," responded the Baronet, testily.

"Then—" she stopped abruptly.

"Then what? Why do you hesitate, Gwen?" he demanded, with the irritability of sickness, while his thin fingers clutched at the coverlet.

"Out of fear of paining you, Hereward. I would have said he is not as forgiving as you. But that I will not believe."

"Could he be so cruel, so unnatural? No, no; impossible! I had the most to pardon. There, as you say, that is not to be believed, for mercenary motives alone, even if all affection were dead, would bring him. Does he not believe that he is disinherited?"

Believe!

Was it that word which made her ladyship

start and pale so? Had it been uttered unconsciously? Was there meaning in it—meaning threatening to balk that end for which she had toiled?

Leaning by the casement, she peered anxiously into the darkness, her hand pressed over her heart; then swiftly she glided back to the bed.

"He believes," she repeated. "Of course, Hereward, he would so believe; I had forgotten that. Ah, did he only know what he loses, he would not travel with such feet of lead."

The Baronet moved his hands and eyes nervously, and, finally, fixed the latter on his wife's face.

It was not easy to see, for his vision was failing fast, and her back was to the light.

"Gwen," he said, hurriedly, yet hesitating in reaching the confession, "blood is thicker than water. None feel that more than the old and dying."

He did not meet her eyes now; had he, it would have been a revelation.

"Herbert has been cruel, disobedient; but he is my only son. Not a child has blessed our union, so there will be more than enough for both. You shall always live as mistress in the Castle. I have made that certain, unless—unless you marry again. Of course, I should not, after all, like the old place to go out of the family—to go to strangers."

He stopped, breathless, working his fingers with piteous feebleness. He seemed to wait for her to speak, but did not look at her.

Lady Cunningham was pale as death. There were blue lines about the mouth and nose, arising from a severe muscular contraction. Her gray eyes throbbled, contracted, and dilated with a dangerous light.

Commanding her voice, she said, quietly, "You are anxious for Herbert's return to make a new will, Hereward?"

"Gwen," he rejoined in a low tone, "death is so uncertain—I—I have felt ill so long, that I did not wait until the eleventh hour. I—have made it already."

"What!"

The word was simple enough, but the tone in which it was uttered brought his eyes quickly upon her.

For a space a veil seemed lifted, and he saw clearly.

"Great Heaven, Gwen!" he cried; "don't look like that! What would you do?"

"What should I do?" she rejoined. "What have I not a right to do? This is how my love and nursing have been returned—by deceit, secrecy, ingratitude! Where is the will? Who has it?"

"What would you do with it? Gwendoline, remember he is my only child—my son. I have left you rich—rich!"

"Do I say otherwise? You have deceived me, mistrusted me. Where is the will? Herbert shall never enter this room until I know. Who has it?"

"No one."

"You have hidden it. Where?"

He made a feeble attempt to lift his arm, but dropped helpless on the pillow.

"Gwen, fetch the nurse; I—I am worse!" he gasped.

She saw it, and had no wish he should die until she had learned where was that will which disinherited her.

Swiftly she moved to the door, but halted half-way, and involuntarily looked back with haggard, startled eyes.

A sudden, muffled cry had seemed to ring through the room. It had not come from the bed, but from behind the paneling.

Had he heard it?

Quickly she stepped to Sir Hereward. His eyes were open, the muscles of the face relaxed.

Uttering a shriek, Lady Cunningham rushed to the door. She found the nurse in the corridor.

"Come, come!" she cried; "I fear Sir Hereward is much worse."

The woman hurried in, and looked upon the patient. Then she dropped the curtain, say-

ing, solemnly, "Y ur ladyship, bear it—pray, bear it—he is dead!"

CHAPTER V.

LADY GWENDOLINE'S PROTEGEE—A CHAMPION.

At the opening of this present chapter, people who had known Sir Hereward personally or otherwise, spoke of "his death fifteen years ago," for such is the period elapsed. Few, however, did speak of it; though, at the time, it had caused much curiosity, speculation, interest, surmise, and wonderment.

Would Sir Herbert attend the funeral? Had he been forgiven? Was he the heir? Would he and his wife instantly take possession of the Castle, ousting her ladyship? What was the nature of the Baronet's will?

These queries for eight days kept the small neighborhood in a constant state of excitement. Every train was watched for Sir Herbert's arrival, yet in vain.

It got rumored that Lady Cunningham had dispatched a special messenger to London to announce his father's death, and bring him back.

This, too, was a failure. Herbert's landlady had stated her lodger had left the house a few days before, without saying where he was going, and had never returned. Surely, she would appear on the day of the funeral, if only to hear the will read.

But, no; Sir Herbert Cunningham put in no appearance. The remains of the late Baronet were consigned to the family vault without a son's hallowing tear, at which none showed more amazement, more distress than her ladyship.

But wonderment was yet added on the reading of the will, made on the day when Herbert had been banished and the lawyer had been summoned.

Herbert's name was not mentioned.

After bequests to friends and servants, it left everything to Lady Cunningham. Only in the event of her not marrying again (that was the strangest part of it) was it to pass back to his nearest of kin. In that the son, no doubt, was implied, but not named. It seemed little to signify, for he put in no claim nor effort to contest the will.

For two years Lady Cunningham remained at the castle, leading a widowed life, receiving a few guests. Then she went abroad, people said, to get married—to make Cunningham hers and her descendants' forever.

But it proved otherwise. In twelve months she returned to the Castle slightly more aged, but yet fascinating and beautiful; while it was soon apparent it was no recluse's life she intended to lead. With her she brought a lovely girl as half companion, half attendant. Lady Cunningham mentioned her as the orphan daughter of a cousin of her late husband, who, being penniless, she had taken out of charity.

Hilda Horne was not much over seventeen; her figure was slight, her features refined and delicate, her expression sweet and gentle, her eyes beautiful as dew-steeped violets, but with a timid, shrinking look in them, which some said was natural, others a feminine art to attract—for it certainly was attractive to the chivalrous heart masculine—while others state it was owing to her ladyship's temper, which a rumor affirmed was anything but as amiable behind the scenes as in society. It went further. It stated there were times when Lady Cunningham was awful, terrifying all who approached her, when her wrath would usually fall upon Hilda.

After these outbreaks, her ladyship generally had a bad night, and could be heard pacing the oaken bedchamber, talking at times as if some one bore her company.

There was only one person who came in her presence at such times with whom she never quarreled. This was Jane Derner, a yellow-faced, dark-haired, silent woman, with a wobble and a halt in her gait. She had been Gwendoline's servant before her marriage, and though age had overtaken her, Lady Cunningham did not pension her off.

She remained at the Castle, keeping in her proper place, though the other domestics declared she lived like a lady.

Lady Cunningham's passion always subsided when Jane Derner appeared; while Hilda had even known the servant to enter and check those restless midnight vigils.

Among those who attributed Hilda's timid, shrinking expression to the third stated reason, and decidedly not to the second, was Jack Bramber, son of old Lord Bramber, who had lately rented The Lodge.

During the first large ball given by Lady Cunningham, he had come upon the girl simply attired in plainest white, standing nervously behind the curtains of a window recess.

Hardly knowing who she was, but pitying her isolation in a scene of so much gayety, notwithstanding she received his advances in a scared manner, he entered into conversation.

He started it first from compassion; but as his genial nature and merry blue eyes, giving her confidence, drew her out, he continued it from interest.

The small lips more than once smiled; the deep violet eyes met his as brightly as his own; and Jack Bramber, in less than ten minutes, came to the conclusion he had never before seen so sweetly pretty a countenance nor so lovable a girl.

Love gives no warning when it sows its seed. A quarter of an hour ago, Jack had been heart-whole; and now a seed had fallen on it that was to bear rapid leaf and flower.

Suddenly the band struck up a lively waltz, whereupon Jack Bramber asked Hilda to be his partner.

"I" ejaculated the girl, amazed, and retreating into her timidity like a snail into its shell. "You are very kind. But, oh, no, thank you! I am not one of the guests, you see."

"No; but you are one of the family," retorted Jack. "And I am sure you can dance like a fairy."

"Then it would be only from seeing others," she smiled, sadly, drawing back. "I have never learned."

"But you like it?"

"Oh, yes," came the instant response.

"Then we will try together, and I will teach you."

Before she was aware, his strong arm was around her slender waist, and in another second he would have whirled her out among the dancers, had his gaze not rested on Hilda's countenance.

Its pale terror frightened him.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated.

"Oh, don't—please, don't!" gasped the girl. "Her ladyship would never pardon me. I know you mean it kindly, but it would be injurious to me. And I'm sure you would not wish to do me harm."

"Harm—! Not for worlds!" exclaimed the young man, slackening his hold, but not altogether releasing it; for his companion seemed really in need of some support. "Why, in Heaven's name, should her ladyship object? Aren't you her relation?"

"Yes—or, rather, no. My father was cousin to her ladyship's first husband. He—he died when I was very young, and left me penniless, without a friend. Lady Cunningham says he is not dead; that he ran away and deserted me. But I am sure that is not true; for I remember him the kindest, dearest father. Still, her ladyship took me out of charity."

"Charity!" repeated Jack, contemptuously.

"It is not always easy to bear, is it?" asked Hilda, raising her violet eyes, with touching naive confidence, to her new friend.

"Easy?"—it must be one of the most difficult things possible."

"Yes. I have been taught, and have in secret learned myself a good deal; for I should like to go away and be a governess somewhere, earning my own living. But her ladyship will not hear of it. She hardly lets me out of her sight."

"Does she—love you?"

"I don't think she cares for me at all."

"I was going to say she has a confoundedly strange way of showing her affection," remarked Jack.

"Oh!" cried Hilda, with a trembling start; "here she comes! Pray don't let her see you with me! Please do not say you have been talking to me, or she will never let you do so again!"

As she spoke, she raised her hand to the window-catch, preparatory to flight into the dark grounds.

He put his hand on hers.

"But I will speak to you!" he said, firmly.

"Her ladyship shall not prevent me."

"But she will prevent me," said Hilda.

"Then I will keep our secret, by all means. But, Miss Horne, you will let me see you again? I must! I am sure we might be capital friends!"

"Oh, pray let me go!" she pleaded.

"Not until you have told me where I may see you to-morrow, and apologize for my rudeness. Yet I don't mean it as rudeness. I only want to see you."

"I shall be among the trees on the east side of the grounds to-morrow at eight. I always walk there," answered Hilda, turning a scared glance toward her ladyship, who had been detained by one of her guests.

"Thank you! I want—I would so much like to be your friend!" said Jack, with earnest chivalry, while he opened the window himself.

Hilda turned upon him a grateful look as she darted through.

"Confound it all!" muttered Jack, watching the slim, white figure vanish in the darkness; "to take such a beautiful girl as that 'out of charity,' and treat her so shamefully! Her ladyship must have a heart of stone! I'll just try if I can't alter matters!"

It sometimes happens in endeavoring to set things right we create greater wrong.

It was quite possible that Jack Bramber was about to experience that.

"Playing laggard, Mr. Bramber?" remarked a low, musical voice behind him, while a fan tapped his arm. "Can so dark a night have greater charms for you than the entertainment I have provided for your pleasure?"

"That would be impossible!" answered Jack, inclining his handsome head. "But the fact is, I was attracted by the beauty of a star. I think it must have been the twin sister of Venus. Certainly I never saw one that so struck me."

"Really you are enthusiastic!" laughed her ladyship. "I fancy your star must have acquired splendor from contrast with the darkness around it."

"That is very probable," was the quiet response.

"May I see your star?"

"I fear it has gone now. An unkind cloud scared it. But your ladyship, no doubt, will soon have another opportunity."

"Not worth troubling about!" she retorted, smiling, raising her lovely shoulders, making the diamond necklet she wore flash forth fifty hues. "Are you not going to join the dance? It is a square one next. Or, perhaps, you have forsown Terpsichore?"

"Not if your ladyship will honor me by becoming my partner!"

"I am sorry, but your uncle has already got my promise."

"My uncle!" ejaculated Jack, in a surprise he could not quite check. "I did not think he still danced."

"Then he will astonish you. I can answer that he dances much better than many younger men."

"Really, then,"—and he looked meaningfully at his companion—"it must be from inspiration."

"Perhaps it is," laughed Lady Cunningham. "I will say I hope it is. I think Lord Bramber most charming."

Jack would have liked to have made the long face he felt; but he said, instead, "So do I this

old Castle! Outside and in, I think it is quite a picture."

"Pray is that meant to refer to your uncle's age?" questioned Lady Cunningham, tapping her jeweled fan on her glove. "Men should not be judged by years, but by their nature. Some are old—worn out at thirty."

"That is true; but really I intended no reference to my uncle, I assure you. I thought but of the Castle. It is very, very ancient, is it not? Played its part, and held its own, in the Civil Wars, no doubt! Possibly—though that is not a pleasant idea—has had murders committed in it! In that case, of course," he laughed, lightly, "in some stated corridor or room the spirits still perambulate. Alas, poor ghost!"

Did her ladyship's cheek grow paler despite the suspicion of rouge tinging it?

Certainly her gray eyes, from under their long lashes, cast a rapid, keen glance at the speaker.

However, she answered in a tone as light as his, "I believe no ancient house or race is considered quite perfect without a ghost, so I have no doubt Cunningham has one—at least, I shall maintain so! Excuse me, Mr. Bramber, but I will now release you from your escort" (they had been moving through the vast ball-room). "Here is your uncle," she added, dismissing Jack with a bow, as a tall, well looking, elderly gentleman—a "beau" in dress and appearance—came toward them.

Jack, by no means loth to be free (for within the last hour he had taken a great dislike to his hostess), lounged through the ball and other rooms in quest of Hilda Horne.

He thought it quite probable that she would have stolen in by another window.

So she had, but only to creep away up to her own little room on the second story, throw herself on her bed, and weep tears that, could Jack have seen them, would have made his honest heart ache with pity and indignation.

Yet for many, many years Hilda had never been so happy. And Jack—how his cheeks would have burned!—was the cause.

The ball was yet progressing gayly; Jack Bramber was moving about, smiling outwardly, but with brooding annoyance in his breast, and Lady Cunningham was still listening to Lord Bramber's whispered compliments, when Hilda Horne finally fell asleep, these words on her lips—"I shall see him again to-morrow."

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNPLEASANT ANNOUNCEMENT—OLD JAMES STONE.

THE gilt French clock on the mantle-piece of The Lodge morning-room had just struck eleven.

The door-windows were open; breakfast was on the table; but, as yet, the only occupant of the apartment was Jack Bramber. Dressed in a light gray suit, he walked the floor, his head bent, and whistling thoughtfully.

It need scarcely be said that the interview among the trees with Hilda had taken place, and the result had thrown him into a state of perplexity.

Two things he found difficult to answer. Why did Lady Cunningham treat her husband's relation so unnaturally?—had the father really run away, a black sheep altogether, and did he (Jack) love Hilda Horne? If not, he was behaving most dishonorably; for he had got her promise to see him again.

"But I do love her," he ejaculated, halting, and sternly regarding a portrait of his paternal uncle. "What's the good of beating about the bush? As pity is akin to love, so is love akin to pity. If I didn't love Hilda Horne, why should the treatment she receives make me so indignant? It's a first sight affair, that's certain. But it's awkward about the father. Suppose he should crop up again? Besides, there's my uncle. I'm his heir, certainly, as far as the title? But his money? He's such a stickler about birth and position."

A step in the hall caused him to break off his reflections. Jack had breakfasted long before,

but he always bore Lord Bramber company at his more substantial repast, and had been waiting for him. Now the door opened, and his uncle entered.

Lord Bramber, when young, had been one of the handsomest and most gentlemanly men of his time, and he could not forget it. He never would.

A beau at twenty, he practiced the beau at sixty-seven, and would if he should live to be a hundred.

Skilfully applied cosmetics and unguents kept his complexion smooth and free from sallowness, but rendered it a dead white, scarcely improved by the slight, delicate color on the cheek. His hair and mustache were dyed, and Jack fully believed, though not quite certain, that his uncle wore stays.

Attired in a rich cashmere dressing-gown, and holding a scented cambric handkerchief in his white hand, Lord Bramber dropped gracefully into his chair by the table.

"Good-morning, Jack," he remarked, in easy tones. "Fear I've kept you waiting, eh? You youngsters are up at dawn, I believe? It used not to be so in my time. We, as Sheridan did, 'liked the day to be well aired first.' Well, what do you think of our charming neighbor? Those sardines, please."

Jack shot a scrutinizing glance at his uncle before he replied. Finally, he evaded a decided response.

"She is very beautiful," he answered.

"Beautiful? Gad, Jack, she's lovely—divine!" ejaculated my lord, warming into enthusiasm, and delicately kissing his scented finger-tips. "The Duchess of Athone, an old flame of mine, couldn't have held a candle to her in her best season. She is exquisite—such form, such intellect, such vivacity! But she's lost here—absolutely lost!"

"Why doesn't she go to London, then, uncle?" said Jack, dryly, not relishing quite this praise.

"Why not?" assented Lord Bramber, leaning back, and reflectively tapping the Sevres coffee-cup with his spoon. "Ah, I wish I had but the opportunity of introducing her! At my age, Jack—ha, ha!—I would be content to shine with a borrowed light."

"You take her to London, my lord?" exclaimed his nephew, throwing up his head, and his blue eyes wide with surprise.

"I said I wished, my dear boy," laughed his lordship, lightly brushing the tips of his fingers with his handkerchief. "No, 'gad—ha, ha!—I may not have aged as other men, but still I have passed the time when to come and to see was to conquer."

Jack Bramber was silent from amaze. Here, decidedly, was a threatened complication of matters. Did his uncle really mean that he was smitten by Lady Cunningham, and intended to enter the lists as her wooer?

In that case, any remarks of his own that Jack might have intended to make respecting her ladyship and Hilda Horne would not only be thrown away, but do more harm than good.

"In a brown study, Jack?" remarked Lord Bramber, darting a keen glance across the table. "I trust we are not to be rivals. Tut! She is lovely, but too old for you."

"Indeed, uncle, you need have no fear on that point. But is it possible—do you really mean that you contemplate—"

"Marrying again—or, rather, wedding Lady Cunningham?" broke in his lordship, concluding the sentence. "Well, why not, Jack? I have been thinking it over during the night. A man, especially a widower, rather finds the need of a companion as his years begin—begin just a little to tell upon him. Of course," he added, rapidly, "I do not intend it should make any difference in your prospects, Jack; my present income you would still inherit. Should any family bless our union, of course, the Castle, their mother's property, would be for them."

Jack Bramber bit his lip. He was astonished, vexed, annoyed. His uncle had every right to

marry again if he chose; yet it was hard. For the time he even forgot Hilda Horne.

"Do you not see it in that light, Jack?"

"I see, uncle, you have a right to marry again, if you please." He had wished to say, "perpetrate an idiotic folly," but wisely curbed his tongue.

"Thank you—thank you, Jack. Take my word, you should not lose by it. If there were no family, the Castle would still come to me—I have ascertained that; and, in time, my dear boy, as my heir, it would become yours. It's a fine place—a very fine place!"

"Have you at all hinted the state of—of your feelings to her ladyship?" queried Jack, mastering his voice.

"No more than the language of the eyes goes," remarked the old beau, shrugging his thin shoulders. "Even in affections of the heart, Jack, I never leap in the dark. But come—what is your opinion of my success?"

The nephew paused, recalling Lady Cunningham's looks and words regarding Lord Bramber the preceding evening; then answered frankly, "I believe, my lord, you will succeed."

"Thank you—thank you. You don't mean it in flattery?"

"No; in right down sober earnest," replied the young man; adding, mentally, "I wish to Heaven I did not!"

"Then thank you again. You shall not lose, I repeat, by taking it in this spirit."

"In what spirit did you expect me to take it?" was the reply, as the speaker took the other's extended hand. "Surely you are at liberty to act as you please?"

"Yes, yes; and my income will be yours, only,"—hesitating—"you see, Jack—of that I'm sorry—if there should be any children,—an heir, the title must pass to him."

"Very well, uncle; then I shall have to go to my grave with plain esquire tacked to my name," answered Jack Bramber, with a short laugh, as he rose from the table. "Will you excuse me if I leave you, but I have an appointment, and I see Clegg has brought my horse?"

That statement about an appointment was scarcely true. But Jack always rode after breakfast, and wanted, as quickly as he could, to get away, and think over what he had heard.

The possibility of his uncle wedding Lady Cunningham had, for the moment, stunned him. Honest, frank, and not an atom selfish, he had owned Lord Bramber's right to do as he chose. Yet, as he rode slowly along the country road, he saw it might prove very perilous to his future.

His interviews with Hilda had given him a better insight into her ladyship's disposition than his uncle had. By her years of juniority, and her dangerous fascination, Lord Bramber would prove but soft clay in her hand. Did children chance to appear, her ladyship might not care to have their father's property willed away to a nephew. Besides, Jack had come across one or two "old inhabitants" who had known her when plain Mrs. Howard Deveril, and who had told him of her marriage with the Baronet, the banishment of the son Herbert, and his singular disappearance out of everybody's ken.

"Who knows but her ladyship may have had a finger in that pie," meditated Jack. "No one ever heard a stranger will than Sir Hereward's, I'm sure. They say the son was never mentioned. Her doing, I swear. Well, then, supposing I married Hilda—and I have never seen any one I cared for so much—and that were to offend my lady, she might get me kicked out, and cut off with a shilling, too."

Certainly the prospect was not encouraging. Jack's reverie was broken by a faint railway whistle.

Raising his head, he perceived the smoke in white wreaths rising through a clump of beeches, from which the train, small at present as a toy affair, speedily issued.

The rails passed across the road that he was traversing; and, as it was easy to see a long

distance down every way, no gate or guardian was placed.

"Shall I be able to get over before it comes?" he thought. "When a man's time is his own, why need he hurry to save a few seconds? Besides, it's express."

He came to this conclusion as he reached the crest of a rise in the road leading to the rails. He might as well draw rein, and wait its passing there as anywhere.

As he did so, he became conscious of an old man in leathern gaiters, straw hat, and a blue coat, some twenty paces in advance, proceeding in the direction of the rails. His gait was unsteady, as of one much enfeebled; and, having nothing better to do, Jack watched him.

"The confounded idiot!" he muttered, as he saw the old fellow approach to the lines, and heard the swift rush of the train. "Why does he go so close? The velocity with which it will pass will be enough to knock him down. Good Heaven!" he added, with a cry and a shiver; "he's going over! He'll be smashed! Is he mad? By Heaven, I see it!—he is drunk!"

The old fellow had crossed half over before he seemed to become aware of the pitiless monster, rushing upon him.

The sight took all power of motion away save from the hands. These he rose, with a piteous scream, toward the smoke-belching engine, as pleading for mercy.

To get out of the way he did not try.

He was paralyzed with terror, and if drunk previously, was now sobered sufficiently to see his awful danger.

"Great Heaven!" cried Jack, as he beheld the shaking knees, the poor, extended, trembling hands, and white hair blowing on the wind; "I can't stand this. If it's to crush us both, I must risk it."

Already he had put his horse at full speed. He knew it was a race between him and the express. One, perhaps two, lives depended on a second lost or gained—on the strength of wrist and steadiness of eye!

In imagination he saw the train hurl the wretched old man yards forward, then crush and tear him as it rushed on; and the idea sickened but did not deter him. He thought not at that supreme moment of peril to himself.

It appeared an age before he reached the rails; yet it was but a few seconds.

The thud of the train seemed to beat like thunder in his brain. He saw the monster close upon him. He seemed to feel the heat of the furnace.

But all he was really conscious of was dashing across the rails behind the old man, seizing the latter by the coat collar with a grip of iron, dragging him after him, then swerving his horse round; for so close had been the encounter, that otherwise its hind quarters might have been struck. Then all three—the frightened, snorting beast, the preserved and preserver—sunk down in a heap together, as with an awful noise the train flew on, with eager, frightened, inquiring heads gazing cut at them from the windows.

Jack, in a few moments, staggered to his feet, secured his horse, that was palpitating and trembling with terror, its large eyes dilated and nostrils blue, then pulled up the shaking object who had been the cause of all.

"You old idiot!" he said; "what made you place yourself in such danger?"

But the "old idiot" was in too pitiable a state even to be angry with. As pale as death, his eyes starting, every nerve trembling, he could but clutch his preserver's arm, and mutter unintelligible sentences.

"The fright has utterly turned his brain, or he isn't yet sober," thought Jack Bramber. "I can't leave him, or he'll be getting into fresh trouble. Where do you live? Down in the village, man?"

But the words, or their significance, failed to reach the old inebriate.

"Saved, saved! Oh, if I had died—died! I—I couldn't—I mustn't—not yet—not yet!" he mumbled; and tears began to trickle down his cheeks. "I ain't fit to die, I ain't!"

"You're not fit to live, you old sinner!" said Jack, heedless that he spoke above his breath.

"Yes, yes; sinner—sinner!"

And the tears fell faster.

"Good Heavens, what a pitiable sight!" thought Jack Bramber, with a shudder. "Delirium tremens, I suppose. Well, I'll get him on to the village. Perhaps I may meet some one who knows the old drunkard."

Putting one hand on the horse's rein, and with the other grasping the arm of the man, he proceeded in the direction. Within half a mile he overtook a field laborer.

"I say, my man," he called, "can you tell me who this old fellow is, and where he lives?"

"Thot, zur," said the laborer, with vicious fingers irritating his shock head. "thot be old Jemmy Stone; her ladyship's pet pensioner, we calls 'un. Be he drunk? What be the matter, zur?"

Jack briefly explained.

"An' you risked your loife to save 'un? Oi wouldn't ha' risked moy horse's, even, the drunken old reprobate! He's allis dronk. I reckon moy lady would ha' been better pleased if you'd let 'un go. She ha' kep' him these fifteen years."

"Why, was he disabled for work? Who was he?"

"Just a servant oop at t' Castle. Disabled?—not as I ever heerd on. She'd pay him double, I've heerd, if he'd leave the ploice."

"I won't leave, I won't," abruptly broke in James Stone, with senile passion, clenching his trembling hands. "I was born here, and I won't go for her ladyship, nor any one. Can't her ladyship trust me?"

He gazed, with his weak, watery eyes, from one to the other; then, apparently forgetting the cause of his wrath, relapsed into tears.

"Do you mind taking him home?" asked Jack, accompanying the request with a proffered shilling. "I'll call and see how he is, to-morrow. The shock may prove more than he can battle against, after all."

The man, readily consenting, led James Stone off, and Jack Bramber, mounting his horse, rode away in an opposite direction, ignorant to what important results his having risked his life in this act of charity was to lead.

CHAPTER VII.

TWO PROPOSALS OF MARRIAGE—JACK'S TERRIBLE SUSPICION.

THREE weeks had passed since the rescue of old Stone, and Jack Bramber had been much lionized for his bravery. The universal opinion, however, was, especially in the village, that he would have done a greater benefit to society had he left the old fellow on the rails. James Stone, indeed, being always drunk, was an unmitigated nuisance, and why her ladyship showed such favor to him, above others, was a surprise to all. In fact, others hinted, as had the laborer, that Lady Cunningham would have been better pleased had the express been left to remove James Stone out of her path.

From her ladyship herself Jack would never have drawn that conclusion. No one could have been more profuse in her thanks and praise.

"My late husband, Sir Hereward, was much attached to James Stone," she said. "Trusted him quite like a confidential servant, and Stone was a faithful creature. Unhappily, after the Baronet's death he took to drinking. So, as I could not keep him at the Castle, and could not let him starve, I thought, out of respect to Sir Hereward's memory, it would be best to pension him off. I am indebted to you much, Mr. Bramber. It would have deeply grieved me had the poor old man met so awful a death. I shall drive over and see him."

Which promise her ladyship fulfilled, surprising the whole village by her unprecedented condescension.

Had she been five minutes earlier she would have met Jack Bramber. Indeed, he frequently looked in upon James Stone. Perhaps, as he had saved his life, he felt it right he should take an interest in it.

The shock produced upon the drink-sodden

old man was never to be overcome. He sat in his chair by the hearth, shaking like an aged paralytic. Even his craving for stimulants had ceased. The only thing that aroused him was the entrance of Jack. His dull eyes would brighten, and he always uttered the same thing—"Ah, you saved me! Heaven bless you, sir! I ain't fit to die! I sha'n't die yet, though Amos Peggin sed my lady would be glad. Ha, ha! Would she? She begrudges me the poor little bit of money, then! Humph! I wonder if she'll be glad when I'm really dead? Ah," catching Jack's arm, "but you won't let me die? You saved me once—you will again, eh?"

And so he would ramble on till Jack withdrew—not, however, before James Stone had made him promise to come again.

The sweetest reward the young man received for his prowess was the expression—half pride in him, half fear for him—of Hilda Horne's face when next they met. Her hand trembled as he took it, and she murmured, plaintively, "You were very brave—a hero! But if you had been killed, Mr. Bramber, oh, what should I have done?"

"Would you so have missed me?" he asked, smiling down upon her.

"Missed you! How could I have done otherwise? No one has ever spoken so kindly to me as you have done. You seem to have brightened my whole life! You cannot tell how wretched that life has been—so dull, so drear! And I tremble lest Lady Cunningham should find out that I come here! She never would let me do so again!"

"Poor child!" said Jack, in compassionate tones, gazing at the lovely countenance raised so trustfully to his. "Her ladyship appears to have only one person dependent upon her that she cares to be kind to—that drunken old fellow, James Stone!"

"Yes," smiled Hilda, as, side by side, they sauntered under the trees in the early morning, brushing with their feet the dew from the grass and ferns; "is it not singular? She treats him as she treats none other of her inferiors. Sometimes, but not often, he comes half tipsy to the Castle, but she always receives him. It is strange!"

"Very," said Jack, dryly, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes on his boots. "Miss Horne, have you ever heard Lady Cunningham speak of her late husband's son?"

"Never more than that he offended his father by marrying beneath him, was disinherited, and sent from the Castle, and was never heard of again."

"But he did marry the curate's daughter?"

"Oh, yes; he had married her in secret long before it was discovered."

"Do you think he did wrong?"

"In marrying the girl he loved, and who loved him? No!" was the instant reply.

"Neither do I."

"Only it was wrong, perhaps, to do it in secret," put in Hilda, like a rider.

"Ah! but I have heard that the Baronet might have overlooked that after a time, but for her ladyship."

"That is possible. She seems very jealous and revengeful."

"Did you ever hear whether Sir Herbert—for of course the title became his—had any children?" proceeded Jack, turning to get a glimpse of the sweet face beside him.

"No," with a shake of the head; "her ladyship never speaks of his affairs."

"Ah! and Mr. Rivers, the curate?"

"Got an exchange after his daughter left, and died, I think, a year or so later."

Jack was silent, falling into meditation.

He was a robust, muscular young Christian, yet had an imaginative brain for all that, and sometimes the stranger's crotchets would get into his head. Now, abruptly, he threw up that member, and burst out laughing.

"Why no?" he queried, unconsciously, aloud.

"Oh, please do n't, for my sake!" pleaded a frightened, tender voice.

Looking, Jack beheld Hilda Horne, peering anxiously among the trees.

"I would do anything for your sake," he exclaimed, perplexed. "But what, Miss Horne, am I particularly not to do?"

"Laugh so loud, Mr. Bramber. It might attract somebody's notice, and then—"

"Then you would suffer," said Jack, as the girl, stopping, drooped her head. "Confound it all, that you should be in such a state of bondage!"

"Ah!"—and she looked up with a timid smile—"I shall run away one day, and try to work for freedom and independence as a governess."

"Freedom and independence as a governess, without capital. You! poor child!" said Jack, gazing still down at her as in a brown study, but as if he hardly saw her.

A flush came to Hilda's cheek. She had a dim sense that she ought to be indignant. But how could she be with this handsome young man, who spoke so kindly as, since that vague recollection of her father, none had ever done. Nevertheless, she said, "I think I must go now, Mr. Bramber."

He still seemed wrapt in the brown study.

"If I stay longer, I shall be missed. Good-morning!"

She had taken a step away before he roused himself.

Following, taking her hands into his, gazing with earnest passion into her violet eyes, he said, in a low, quick, clear tone, "Miss Horne—Hilda, do you know what love is? Can you, do you think, ever love me? I love you with all my soul. Will you be my wife?"

She turned red, then terribly pale, as, shrinking back, she gasped, "Your wife?"

But Jack could see the shrinking was not pain; he had only startled her.

"Miss Horne, I confess to thinking there is a mystery about you. Will you give me the right, as your lover and future husband, to unravel it?"

She had plucked her hands away to cover her face, and stood trembling before him. Was it joy or sorrow that made her heart beat so fast?

"I will not ask your answer now," Jack proceeded, gently. "My abruptness, I perceive, has startled you. Take time to think over it; and will you meet me here again to-morrow, to let me know your decision? If— if you can say yes, Hilda, you will make me the happiest man on earth."

She lifted her head, tears were in her eyes, but they shone like stars. Impulsively she extended her hands.

"Oh, Mr. Bramber, you carry your pity too far—you are too good!"

"My pity!—it is my love, Hilda," he exclaimed, clasping her hands, and drawing her to him. "Can you love me?"

Before she could reply, there was a distant sound of some one among the trees. The scared girl, instantly taking alarm, darted away. Jack had but time to whisper "To-morrow," when, nodding back at him, she was gone.

"Well," repeated the young fellow, as he strode to the gate giving onto the road. "I'm glad I've done it. Whatever may happen in the future, no stain shall be cast on my affection; she, at least, will know it was sincere."

He proceeded with quick strides to The Lodge, the fingers of one hand in his trowser-pocket, those of the other pulling his mustache.

"It's a confoundedly queer crotchet," he muttered. "How the deuce it popped into my head I don't know. As the world is made up of atoms, p'raps this idea is—the atoms of words, circumstances, molded into form by imagination. Ha, ha! One thing is certain—it's there, and will not be dislodged; and I think there's foundation for its tenacity. There is another thing positive: I'm bound to Hilda Horne, and"—lifting his hat, as he bent his sparkling love-lit eyes on the blue sky—"bless Heaven for it!"

But these events, with Hilda's whispered, happy confession of a reciprocal love, were not the only ones that occurred during the three weeks.

One morning, Lord Bramber, looking younger than ever, having been longer than usual over his toilet, which, save to his valet, was a mystery of mysteries, took his seat at the breakfast-table with an air of gaiety, and exclaimed, as he waved the delicate perfume from his handkerchief, "My dear Jack, congratulate me. Yes, egad! you are such a decidedly unselfish, right-minded, right-seeing young fellow, that I can really ask for your congratulation."

"I am ready to bestow it, I assure you, uncle, if it be for your happiness."

"My happiness? Gad!" kissing his fingertips. "What Goth could doubt it? Were you really ever in love, my dear boy?"

Jack evaded the question by saying, "I suppose, uncle, in your case, love and Lady Cunningham are synonymous? I draw from your words that she has accepted you?"

"She has, Jack; I am the happiest man in the world. Gad! I feel twenty years younger. And she is as amiable as beautiful. Imagine, she made not the slightest demur. Indeed, she approved of your remaining my heir as far as the income. In fact, she spoke most flatteringly of you, and of the excellent marriage such a fellow as you with your appearance is certain to make."

"I am really much obliged to her ladyship for taking an interest in my affairs," said Jack.

"Not surprising. She, of course, feels like one of the family. A high-sounding alliance—ha! ha!" laughed his lordship, airily. "Yes; your lovely step-mother and I shall expect it of you. Remember that, Jack; we shall expect it."

"I'll not forget," responded Jack, off-handly, muttering, however, beneath his breath, "Confound her!—does she suspect?"

Breakfast over, Jack set off to the village. He had a call to make, and it was upon James Stone.

That awful shock he had received was never to be got over by the wretched inebriate. He was rapidly sinking. No greater proof was needed than the loathing he had taken for the drink that had been his ruin.

All day he would sit in his chair in a state of apparent stupor. Only Jack knew that there was vitality enough in him to throw this off if he chose.

Lady Cunningham carried her sympathy so far that she would have sent Jane Derner to nurse him; but James Stone had refused in a fashion that her ladyship had not deemed it advisable to argue against. He only allowed the wife of a neighbor to come in as she had always done for a weekly sum, to "tidy up," and also Jack Bramber.

"You saved my life at the risk of your own," he said. "And I can trust you. You can't want a poor old chap dead."

Lady Cunningham, toward the close of those three weeks, had jested her future stepson upon turning nurse. He had answered, carelessly, "I am no nurse. But it seems the right thing for me to take an interest in his wretched life. So, as an idle man, I drop in to say 'How are you?'—that is all!"

"You think him ill?"

"Very. The stupor increases. I shouldn't be in the least surprised to find one day that he had died peacefully in his chair."

Had Jack Bramber been looking at Lady Cunningham instead of covertly into the conservatory, where Hilda had been sent to gather the table flowers, he might have been startled by the singular light that appeared in her ladyship's eyes.

As he entered James Stone's cottage, he found the old man not in his usual place by the window, but seated in the corner near the fireless grate. He was in a state of evident agitation.

"What is the matter?" asked Jack. "Aren't you so well?"

"Well! It's my opinion, sir, I'll never be that," moaned the old fellow. "I'm going to die!"

"The surest way not to recover is to give up hope, Mr. Stone," said Jack, kindly. "Though every one should try to be prepared for death when it comes. For it must come one day to us all."

"That's it—that's it! Prepared! I might die to day—I might live for years—eh?"

"I see no reason why you should not," said Jack, not truthfully, but encouragingly.

"Well, that's cheering. If you don't mind, would you sit down? I'd like to chat a bit."

Jack Bramber was one of the best fellows out.

Drawing forward a chair, he sat down.

Half an hour later he made an inquiry.

"Is there any one in the cottage besides ourselves?"

"Mrs. Mather—she's tidying up; and a furious row she makes, bother her!"

"She'll do. I'll fetch her. You'd better have some beef tea, too, I think."

Jack went in search of Mrs. Mather, whom he found banging old Stone's feather bed, as if it had been her mortal enemy. After a brief, but rapid conversation, he led her into the parlor.

A quarter of an hour later than that he left the cottage, a strange elation on his handsome countenance.

"If—if—if!" he kept half singing to himself; but if what, he did not state.

That evening he told his uncle that he thought he'd run up to London for a few days for a change.

"That's right, Jack; by all means!" remarked Lord Bramber. "I have some commissions, if you will take the trouble."

So Jack prepared to start next morning. As he was in the act of mounting the dog-cart to drive to the station, a man came hurrying up from the village.

"What is it?" inquired Jack.

"Please, sir, I was told to come and tell 'ee as old Jammy Stone was found dead in his cheer this mornin'."

"In his chair? Then he had never been in bed? Who saw the poor fellow last?"

"It mun 'a' been Lady Cunningham. She called to ask how he was yester noight."

"Good Heaven!" gasped Jack beneath his breath, for an ugly thought had sprung into his brain.

James Stone's death, however, did not prevent his going to London.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNFAIR FIGHT—THE ROOM IN THE WEST TOWER.

On the night of James Stone's death, Lady Cunningham, returning from her visit to him, had proceeded at once to her bed-chamber. Here throwing off her outdoor attire, she disclosed a face pale with indignation and passion. Her very beauty made the expression of rage the more awful.

Her bed-chamber was the large, dark oak-paneled one in which Sir Hereward had died. She had always disliked it for its gloom, but when it was in her own power to quit the apartment, a feeling, a fear kept her there.

They were the oak panels which had witnessed those midnight paces; and now her ladyship began walking to and fro, her fingers twitching convulsively, and a thin line of froth lying upon her lips.

"No sooner do I remove one obstacle from my path than another springs up in it," she muttered. "But I'm not to be balked—balked by her! I have vowed to set all beneath my foot, and I will. Beggars I made them, beggars they shall remain! Oh," and her eyes wandered round the darkling room, "if only—if only I had succeeded in that, I need have had no fear—none! Now any accident, or any day—But that is not the most important subject at this moment," she interrupted. "It is this girl. So there are clandestine meetings

between her and Jack Bramber! I wonder for how long this has been going on? Oh, how cunning has Miss been! But she shall find I can outwit her! Does she—can he mean honorable love? Impossible, in his position! Still, men have been known to sacrifice everything for a pretty face—witness Herbert Cunningham! Then, if I die childless, the Castle would go by right to him and her. Never!"

The voice alone could describe the deep significance there was in that last word.

"I must discover—I must ascertain the truth," proceeded Lady Cunningham, as, crossing to the bell, she rung it three distinct times. Then she sat down, her lips compressed, her face gleaming strangely white from the dark, high-backed chair, and waited.

In a brief space the door opened, and Hilda's slight, fair figure appeared on the threshold.

"Your ladyship rung for me?" questioned the low, sweet voice.

"I did. Come in, close the door, and come here."

Hilda obeyed, with a shiver, for the expression on the features of her patroness startled her. The cold, hard, clear gray eyes seemed to pierce her.

"I scarcely expected you to answer my summons, Miss Horne," began my lady, in chill, sneering tones, as the young girl timidly halted in front of her, with drooped, clasped hands, and bent head. "I feared you might not have returned from your assignation with your lover."

A wave of brilliant red rushed over Hilda's fair skin at the idea that her secret had been discovered.

Involuntarily she raised her frightened eyes as she gasped, "Your ladyship!"

"What well-acted amazement!" broke in Lady Cunningham, with a short laugh. "Or is your alarm created by finding, Miss Horne, you are detected? I suppose you do not mean to deny, after what I witnessed to-night, his arm round your waist, his lips pressed to yours, that Mr. Bramber is your lover?"

"You witnessed, your ladyship?" gasped the poor girl, overwhelmed with terror and confusion.

"I witnessed. Returning from my visit to that wretched old James Stone, I came through the trees, and saw your parting, I suppose, as you have so soon followed, from your lover, Mr. Bramber. Answer me, girl," her voice breaking into anger, and bringing her white fingers sharply down on the oak arms of the chair, "is he not your lover?"

A violent struggle seemed going on in Hilda's slight frame. Then, rendered bold by the knowledge of Jack's affection, she said, low, but firm, while her glance calmly met the other's, "Yes, your ladyship, Mr. Bramber loves me."

"How?"

"How?" and the girl's pure eyes opened, mutely interrogative.

"Yes, how? He a gentleman; you a beggar, a pauper dependent for your daily bread! Do you think he would marry such as you?"

Again that wave of color. Then, with suddenly erect, proud head and flashing eyes, Hilda replied, "Lady Cunningham, Mr. Bramber is a gentleman; and is too noble, too honest, to address me save as a lady. My very helpless, penniless dependence would in his eyes be my shield from insult."

Her ladyship had dropped rather back in her chair, her lips more set, her gaze riveted on the girl. She was evidently taken by surprise at this new spirit in the worm which until now she had held so easily beneath her heel.

When she spoke again she no longer did so in passion; she had measured her antagonist—this child, young, yet suddenly so resolute—and saw its uselessness.

"Well," she said, coldly; "he loves you—honorably."

"He has asked me to be his wife."

"And you?"

"Have"—with a quick radiance of expression—"consented."

"A good thing for you. But have you, in your wonderful affection, thought of him?"

"I do not understand your ladyship."

"The probable misery and trouble you will entail upon him by letting him, out of a sense of chivalry, wed a poor, penniless dependant?"

"Why am I dependent, Lady Cunningham?" broke in Hilda Horne. "Not by my own wish, but by your will. Have I not entreated to go forth into the world, to work, I cared not how hardly, that I might win independence and make my own future, instead of suffering the bondage I undergo beneath this roof? Why would you not permit me?"

Lady Cunningham rose, stiffly erect. Her face was set, but threatening, scornful.

"Why?" she answered. "That you should never mar the future of another as you would now Mr. Bramber's. That you should not bring the disgrace on others that rests on yourself, as your father's daughter—a forger, a—"

"Stop!" And the girl, looking straight into my lady's eyes, said steadily, "Lady Cunningham, who was my father?"

A shadow swift and fleeting swept over her ladyship's countenance; her lips turned paler; she stepped back.

"Why do you ask?" she demanded. "You know—"

"Many things. That he was, according to your account, your first husband's cousin. In that case, why am I not permitted to see my father's own kin? Why am I kept here a stranger to them?"

"Your father disgraced them. They would not own you. They cast you off."

"Stay, Lady Cunningham!" and Hilda raised her small hand. "I said I knew many things. I know this. Your first husband had neither uncle nor aunt; therefore, he could have no cousin. You must have told me wrongly."

Her ladyship never moved. She only looked at her antagonist; yet there was a red, shifting light in the eyes beneath the half-drooped lashes, and a quiver of the mouth-muscles, that could Hilda Horne have perceived might have warned her to keep her knowledge to herself—certainly not to expose her hand to her enemy, for the contest was not equal.

But brave in the assurance of Jack Bramber's love, she no longer could, nor cared to, control the new spirit within her. She had ceased to be friendless and alone, and the bonds of her ladyship once revolted against, she desired to break them entirely. In her ignorance, she hoped by showing her knowledge to terrify the other into confession.

Lady Cunningham, after a space, slowly resumed her seat, a smile parting her lips.

"Really this is wonderful," she said. "Then, if not Edmund Horne's daughter, who do you think you are?"

"I do not know; I only have my suspicion."

"Am I permitted to learn what that points to? You think you are—?"

"I think very possibly I am," said Hilda, quietly, "Sir Herbert Cunningham's daughter."

Perhaps her ladyship expected that answer. Certainly directly it was given she burst into, for her, a loud, derisive laugh.

"You Sir Herbert Cunningham's daughter! Sir Herbert, the mysterious!" she exclaimed. "Well, this would add to the mystery and romance, certainly. Girl," she added, sharply, "who put this absurdity into your head?"

"Fancies," responded Hilda. "If it be an absurdity, then, Lady Cunningham, I am just where I was before."

"And where you will continue to remain," was the answer, with a scornful shrug. "Had I known you would have flown at such high imaginings, never would I have had anything to do with you, nor shown you charity. But I must pass to more serious matters. The other can wait until you can prove Sir Herbert had a daughter. You are aware that I am engaged to wed Lord Bramber?"

"I am."

"Then neither he nor I would countenance such a misalliance as his nephew, according to

you, contemplates. I have agreed that Mr. Bramber shall yet remain his uncle's heir, but if he wed you he will be disinherited—cast adrift on the world, even as was Sir Herbert. Reflect. You say you love him. Will you marry and cause his ruin, or will you sacrifice yourself, and save him?"

Hilda paused, and then replied, "I must see Mr. Bramber before I decide."

"Impossible! You may write. There—write! Give him up, and you shall have your wish. You shall go abroad, and I will start you to win your independence."

"Your ladyship, what you have said about my ruining Mr. Bramber may be true. If so, be sure I should hesitate before doing that. Yet, I must see him again. I can consent to nothing until I have. There are circumstances which make it absolutely necessary."

Lady Cunningham looked at the girl through her long, drooping lashes, and her lips began to tighten with rage as she noted her calm, resolute demeanor. Then something like a sensation of fear stole over her.

What did she mean by "circumstances?" What was their nature?

"Do you intend to say that nothing will make you alter your mind?" she asked, quietly, after a pause of reflection. "That *nothing* will change you? That you will subject yourself and him to the pain of an interview?"

"Nothing."

"Then the matter is ended," remarked her ladyship, as if abandoning the subject. "John Bramber's ruin rests with you, so look to it. Only know this, and tell him, neither his uncle nor I will be disgraced by such a union. There! pass me my desk and stay here. I may want you."

Hilda, relieved at the cessation of the topic, readily obeyed. Lady Cunningham, for a quarter of an hour, occupied herself in sorting and docketing letters, as if preparatory for her marriage, which was to take place in about three weeks. One packet she tied with red tape, and put apart from the rest.

Her manner was composed. Had that thought of Jack Bramber's, on hearing of James Stone's death, any foundation? If so, this was a wonderful woman, indeed. Suddenly she rose.

"Bring the light, Hilda," she said, in her usual tones. "I have got to look for some letters."

The girl took the lamp, and followed. They ascended the broad staircase, their blending shadows nodding and waving like warning gnomes on the oak wainscot of the walls as they went.

Passing the next corridor, they ascended to the next, which, like the former, had but disused rooms giving on to them, for they were guest-chambers. Proceeding along the last, Lady Cunningham unlocked the door of what used to be called the west tower room, being situated in one of the towers. On rare emergencies, the servant of a guest would be put there, so there were the usual bedchamber requisites. Yet, the place being round, and with the merest slit for a window, it had a prison-like aspect, especially as the door was furnished with a movable wicket or slide.

Lady Cunningham, going to a chest of drawers, unlocked one, and put some papers in it, then began to turn over some loose articles. Abruptly, she said, "I think I will put those other letters here, too—those tied with tape. Fetch them, Hilda; you can take the light. I am not afraid of the dark."

The girl took the lamp, and went. It was nearly ten minutes before she returned. She entered unsuspectingly, approached the table, and placed the packet down.

"Here it is, Lady Cunningham," she said. Then, with a start, looked round, for she heard the door close, and the lock turn!

She was alone, and a prisoner.

The next moment, the little wooden door slid back, and Lady Cunningham's face appeared at it.

"What do you mean by this, your lady-

ship?" cried Hilda, half-terrified, half-indignant. "Is it a jest?"

"Far from it. It is a method, Hilda Horne, to cure romantic, refractory children. If you will not listen to reason, you must be made to submit to force. Do not fear you are safe. Here you will have time for quiet reflection. Lord Bramber, and I as his future wife, cannot be disgraced. Directly you promise to give up John Bramber, and never see him again, you shall be free. Until you do, you remain here!"

"This is shameful! It is terrible!" cried Hilda. "Oh, help!—help! Is there no one to free, to help me?"

"None. As you are aware, directly this door is closed, your cries, be they ever so loud, cannot through this oak be heard, even down in the next corridor. As to the window, it runs slanting upward, so your cries could never reach any one in the grounds. Now, for the last time, will you go abroad, and give up John Bramber?"

"Never, now," replied the girl, haughtily, "though I die!"

"I shall have you asked the question every day for two months," said her ladyship. "Then, if you still remain obstinate—"

"Then?"

The gray eyes glittered like a cat's; the voice came tense, clear.

"Then—I will kill you! Farewell!"

And without another word, Lady Cunningham secured the slide, and groped her way back to her bedroom, where, sinking into the high-back chair, she murmured with satisfaction, "That is accomplished. It was well thought of; what could have made her hit upon that idea of being Sir Herbert's daughter? It is singular. For her, it is dangerous. Better to cross the panther's path than mine!"

Her beautiful brows contracted. She drummed her fingers thoughtfully on the table; then rung for Jane.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LAWYER'S LETTER—DESPERATION.

FOR a week matters went on pretty much as usual at Weirbourne—that is, as far as appearances went. James Stone had been buried, much to the village's relief, and the preparations for Lord Bramber and Lady Gwendoline's marriage were progressing rapidly.

Large packages from West End tradespeople were incessantly arriving at the Castle or The Lodge.

His lordship fell in a beautiful dream, and all the time he was not with his future bride, was busy with selections of horses, carriages, upholsterers, tailors, and others.

The village caught the infection, and, in expectancy of gay doings, began to prepare for the day, too.

In the midst of the bustle Jack Bramber came back, looking decidedly better for his trip, though at times his manner was marked by a restless excitement that was not habitual to him.

When he saw his uncle's arrangements for the soon-coming ceremony, his countenance changed somewhat. A certain regret settled about his heart.

"Confound it all!" he muttered. "Yet what can a fellow do?"

It appeared not easy to decide, especially as Lord Bramber was full of talk, being in excellent spirits, as they sat at the late dinner, in time for which Jack had arrived.

"Are you engaged this evening, my lord?" asked the nephew, abruptly.

"I am, Jack. You see I did not know of your return. I shall leave you to drink your wine alone, my boy. I'm due at half-past seven at the Castle."

"Not, I suppose, to meet the lawyers, for settlements or that kind of thing?"

"No, not yet; that matter is to take place the day after to-morrow."

"Ah," said Jack, thoughtfully, then. "Well, uncle, what I have to speak to you about will do as well at breakfast time as now."

"Not caught in Hymen's net yourself, eh, Jack?"

"I don't know,"—with a careless laugh. "But as to the Castle, I suppose things are going on just as when I left? No influx of visitors?"

"No; those that are invited are to arrive only within a few days of the ceremony. All is yet the same; except, by the way, that pretty girl, Gwendoline's *protegee*, Hilda Horne—"

"What of her?" inquired Jack, quickly.

"Has left the Castle to visit some of her ladyship's friends."

"Left the Castle?" repeated Jack Bramber, an imperceptible fall in his tones.

"Went away, I was told, the very day you did. I don't know whether she is to return for the wedding or not. Now, my boy, I must ask you to excuse me,"—and his lordship rose.

"It would hardly be the right thing, you know, for a lover to keep his mistress waiting; and such a mistress!"—kissing his finger-tips.

"She is divine; as lovely as she is good."

"Does he really, sincerely love her?" reflected Jack, watching the antiquated beau's jaunty exit from the room.

Then dropping back on his chair, his countenance grave, he muttered, "Hilda left the Castle, and so suddenly! She knew nothing of it when we met that night, I'd swear, or she would have told me. Can there be anything in it? 'He who does will yet dare,' says the proverb. Well, but it is a game two can play at. I must find out. Hilda will surely have found means to leave some communication."

Finishing his wine hurriedly, Jack Bramber rose, took his hat, and set off for the old rendezvous—for old it was now—in the Cunningham grounds. Of course he did not expect to find Hilda; but he did a notice from her, as to why and where she had gone.

Walking straight to an old oak, whose fibrous, knotty base was covered with fern, he drew the latter aside, and put his hand into a small hole, till then concealed, in the trunk. Naturally, he found it empty.

"It's strange," he muttered. "She couldn't have found an opportunity to come. And I've a strong suspicion if I were to ask Lady Cunningham where she is gone, she would not tell me. I should fear for my darling's safety if I imagined her ladyship could at all have suspected. But that's impossible. I've taken too many precautions, and worked in secret like the mole."

During these reflections he had quitted the grounds. He was annoyed, but not uneasy, even when it occurred that in a week's time Hilda might have written. Fear of her letter falling into other hands would have prevented that, as she did not know his London address, and was uncertain about the time of his return to Weirbourne. So, as he strode along the high road, he turned his eyes with very different feelings upon the Castle than he would have done had he known that his beloved lay pining a prisoner in yonder high, gray tower, rearing itself up into the slate-blue, gloomy sky, and how frequently her piteous cries, issued from the loop-hole to beat themselves against the vault of heaven, but never reaching earth, from whence help might come.

Ignorant of this, Jack Bramber retired early, fatigued by his journey; but mental excitement overcame physical weariness, and, broad awake, for long he tossed, thinking about that conversation with his uncle on the morrow which was to be no pleasant one, and for which Lord Bramber might blame him and feel excessive anger; also of the communication which he knew was to arrive for Lady Cunningham by the earliest post.

In fact, he knew the next day would be an eventful one. He was right. But it was to exceed even his expectations.

As her ladyship, awaking to it, pushed back the heavy curtain, she saw the morning was bright and beautiful.

"How oppressive has been the night, Derner!" she said to the servant who had entered.

"And so still, my lady!" was the curt response. "If there's any more such nights, that girl up there may make herself heard. I feel sure I heard her once last night."

"Never!" cried her ladyship, starting up.

"If so, I must see to it."

Jan Derner, facing round, looked fixedly at her; then, raising her finger, said, in sentences that were not vague to the hearer, "Not in that way, my lady! Recollect that. There's been enough of it already."

Lady Cunningham's fine shaped lips compressed viciously; but she rejoined, with a mocking laugh, "As if there were no way of keeping the child quiet but one!"

"Humph! you can laugh; I can't. As I've said over and over again, it isn't fair. But there! ill seeds once sown can't be picked up again."

"You are right; so help me to dress, Derner, and cease maundering."

Elegantly attired in a tasteful morning toilette, Lady Cunningham descended to the bright little apartment where she always breakfasted.

A heap of letters awaited her, and those in blue envelopes predominated.

They were from those West End tradespeople; and between discussing her chocolate, my lady opened them, made notes on the backs, and put them aside.

At last she came upon one, blue enveloped, and having no distinctive mark outside to warn her that it was no tradesman's polite missive, like the rest.

Carelessly she broke it asunder, then abruptly sat erect, for her eyes had rested on the printed address at the top—Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Curiosity, perplexity, surprise, interest, blended in her face, and she read:—

"MADAM,—

"It having been told us, upon clear, authentic evidence, that the late Sir Hereward Cunningham, anterior to his demise, in secret executed a later will than that read at his funeral, we beg to inform you that, as the solicitors retained by those who are acting in the interest of Sir Herbert Cunningham and his heirs, we find it necessary that a search should be instituted through the Castle, and strict inquiries made, for which purpose the head of our firm will wait upon you the day after to-morrow, when we should like to be put into communication with your solicitor, as it is wished to have the unpleasant matter amicably arranged, if possible.

"We are, madam,

"Your obedient servants,

"GRANITE, HARDWARE & SON.

"To Lady Cunningham, Cunningham Castle."

Before my lady had ended the perusal, a greenish hue had spread over her countenance. Not a muscle moved. Only her eyes seemed to contract, and the light in them grew more brilliant. She sat gazing on the letter, motionless.

Finally, with an effort, she raised her head, and strove to speak. She could not until she had moistened her lips; then, in a hard whisper, "Whose work is this?" she gasped, hoarsely, her eyes fixed before her, as though she were addressing some unseen person.

She paused, as if for a reply, then went on.

"I know. I cannot doubt. This is John Bramber's work. I see it all. I was too late. I hastened the old sinner's end to little purpose. He must have confessed—before—Oh, Heaven!"

Suddenly she dropped back, covering her face with her hands. Soon she burst forth again, more rapidly and with increasing excitement.

"It is *he* who has been working against me, and for love of that girl! Is love to prove my overthrow, as it has been the ladder of my revenge? John Bramber must have told her, hence her suspicions that she is Sir Herbert's daughter. Sir Herbert! If so, he held his title but a brief space. But why think of that now? Is not this?"—and furiously she struck the letter—"enough, and more than enough, to occupy me? What am I to do? Deny all knowledge of this will, of course. Yet how can I tell what James Stone has said? The old villain, to turn upon me when he could no longer benefit by my bounty! Let me think—let me think!"

Too restless to remain still, rising, she paced the room, pressing with her hands the hair back from her temples. Her face was of a strange pallor, save for two glowing red spots on the cheeks; while her eyes, fixed, stony, yet seemed to emit a red, angry light.

"If I lie to them," she proceeded, "do not let me be idiot enough to seek to deceive myself! Of course it is James Stone who confessed! And he has told all—all; else why should these men term it an 'unpleasant matter,' and desire 'an amicable arrangement?' No; they know, they know—know that I paid him, one of the witnesses to that secret will, to hold his tongue! While he lived terror held him mute! But dying, what cared he for me? Well—ha, ha!—I had my revenge on him, too; and I am glad, glad!"

She was silent a space, during which her countenance changed to many expressions.

Sometimes to fear, but that was rare and transient; sometimes she gave short, sharp laughs, but as if unconsciously, and having no connection with her thoughts.

"They will be here to-morrow!" she broke out once more. "Of course to search! Well, they can do nothing without the will; and cannot I outswear James Stone?—for they will never find it! Have I not searched everywhere? But they may possibly pull down the panels, or tear up the floors! Ah!"—and with fierce passion she beat her hands together—"why did I not carry out my first intent, and burn the place to the ground? There would have been no finding then! I dare not do it now! And yet I would, this instant, accepting all the consequences, rather than a child of Sir Herbert's, the man I hated, ruined, and— and killed—yes, let me say the word—should call this place theirs!"

This thought, somehow, got a hold over her brain. Never had Herbert Cunningham read a nature so well as when he called her hard and pitiless.

For an hour she remained lost in troubled reflection. Once she had been on the point of summoning Jane Derner, but refrained.

"No," she muttered; "better take no one into my confidence! She, too, has begun to preach, and finds she has a conscience!"

"Taking the letters, she went to her room, where she locked Messrs. Granite, Hardware and Son's away in her desk. Then she dressed; for she had promised to drive to visit a friend that morning, and determined no alteration in her plans should create suspicion.

"As, handsome, stately, statuesque, reclining amid the soft cushions of the carriage, she drove through the lodge-gates, she saw a man talking to the lodge-keeper. My lady's eyes and lips contracted.

"I am watched!" she reflected. If that man be not a detective, I never saw one!"

She was made sure of it before she returned. For the man, now on horseback, passed her on the road, and every now and then kept turning up in her path.

"I couldn't escape if I would!" she muttered. "That man has a warrant for my arrest in his pocket! I know it! If I attempted to fly, he would serve it! Affairs are desperate! Well, so am I! Before all things, my revenge; and it shall be bitter! They shall see!"

CHAPTER X.

PITILESS UNTO DEATH—SUNSHINE.

A GLOOM hang over the Lodge. Jack had said his say at last, but after much nervous delay. As the morning dawned, the difficulties of his part seemed considerably to increase, and greater caution to be requisite.

Supposing his uncle was so infatuated as not to believe? Supposing, flying into a passion, he went over to Cunningham, and put her ladyship on her guard? There was nothing more likely, and nothing Jack would so much avoid.

What was to be done? Better to defer his intelligence until after the arrival of the lawyer, but now that idea was rather too late. Lord Bramber, whose memory had even, like himself, seemed to grow younger, would surely in-

quire what that news was which Jack had desired to communicate.

"Suppose I go out, and don't see him?" reflected Jack, ruffling his silky hair into a perfect tangle in his perplexity. "Not until the evening, that is? It is but justice, it is but kindness, that he should have the news first from me. I fear he'll be awfully cut."

Before he could decide, Lord Bramber entered the breakfast-room, and, to cover his agitation, Jack seized one of the morning papers. The first thing his eyes rested upon was a murder that was for a long time to excite the world.

He seized upon it as a drowning man seizes a straw, but it rendered him truer service. Lord Bramber grew interested, and Jack, sometimes not knowing the words he was uttering, read on, until Clegg appeared with his horse, and he escaped.

For a time only. He returned during the afternoon, meaning, however, again to take flight—but it was not to be.

As he was passing through the hall, Lord Bramber, opening the study door, called him in.

"By the way, Jack," he said, kindly, "you had something to speak to me about. At least, you said so last evening. It was very careless of me to forget, my dear boy. You should have reminded me. But I suspect that horrible murder put it out of both our heads. Murder! The mere word makes one shudder. I can conceive many things, Jack, but I cannot that of one being taking another's life. In my eyes, no circumstances can extenuate the deed. But there! I don't believe there would be half the murders there are if they were not written and talked about so much. Let us, at least, change the subject. You want to speak to me—I to you—and hope both subjects will be of a pleasanter nature."

Never had Jack Bramber felt more wretchedly uncomfortable. All had seemed to be such plain sailing until now.

"You wish to speak to me, uncle?" he said, seeking yet to gain a few minutes' respite.

"Yes; I wish, my boy, to arrange about your future—to settle a larger income on you, you know, for you will not care, of course, to be tied down to Cunningham. But your affair first—yours first."

Then Jack, taking his courage in both hands, made his statement of James Stone's confession, his suspicions that Hilda was really Sir Herbert's daughter, and how he had placed the matter in the hands of Messrs. Granite, Hardware & Son.

Lord Bramber was at first surprised, then frightened, then angry. Why had Jack dared to act thus, on his own responsibility, without consulting him?

"To save you, out of very deep consideration to you, my lord," replied Jack. "I know that the chivalric sentiments you hold toward the sex would have moved your heart, too generously, to sacrifice yourself for them. Also, aware of your affection for Lady Cunningham, I wished to keep your name from the unpleasantness of being mixed up in this unhappy matter; though, love her as you may, I do not think you would care to wed a woman who, I fear, has committed worse than robbery—even murder!"

"I don't believe it. I will not; at least, sir, without further proof."

So estrangement grew between the uncle and nephew. They met at dinner without speaking, until, testily, Lord Bramber said, as they sat silently over their wine, "How insufferably close it is! Can't you draw back the curtains? What induced Clarke to close them?"

As Jack complied, he uttered a loud exclamation.

"What's the matter?" demanded my lord.

"The Castle is on fire!"

"Fire!" repeated his lordship, springing up.

"Yes, uncle. By Heaven, she has set fire to it to destroy the will and proofs of her guilt!"

"Jack Bramber!" cried my lord, though he had turned white; "how dare you?"

But Jack had rushed into the hall, seized his hat, and was off to Cunningham. He had not been deceived. The west tower was in flames. He had seen the glare on the windows, and the rolling volumes of smoke, when he pulled back the curtain. Before he had gone far, he met crowds of excited villagers running in the same direction as himself, while the air was vibrating with the word "Fire!"

The engines had been sent for; every bucket and every hand was in requisition.

As Jack rushed with the crowd through the gates, the man whom my lady had declared a detective accosted him.

"Do you fancy you can account for this fire, sir?"

"I fear so."

"She's a determined one, she is!"

"I suppose the flames can be got under?"

"Not the west tower. *That's* done for; and there, a' course, the will's hid that nobody could find."

On reaching the front, the detective's words proved true. The rooms of the west tower were chiefly of oak panel, and burned furiously. The place was doomed.

When the firemen arrived, they confirmed this, and directed their efforts to prevent the spread of the flames; while a band was organized to carry out and guard any valuable furniture, pictures, and plate.

"Where is Lady Cunningham?" inquired Jack of a servant he managed to stop in the confusion.

"Safe, sir. She is directing what articles are to be removed. No one is in the west tower now."

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Jack; then, turned, for, as the man had sped on, a hand was laid on his arm. Looking down, he beheld the scared, pale, terrified face of Jane Derner.

"Is false," she whispered, excitedly. "He doesn't know. I've gone far, and done much with my lady, but I can't do this. There is some one in the tower, and she can't get out, for she's locked in. Oh, horror! I fancy I hear the screams above this hubbub; but it can't be! And she wrung her hands. 'Oh, save her! save her! Here is the key!'"

Jack seized it, as he cried, "Some one locked in, woman? Whom?"

"Miss Hilda Horne—or Hilda Cunningham, for that's what she is!—that's what she is!"

With a loud cry, Jack seized the speaker.

"Woman," he ejaculated, "you speak not truly! Who dared lock her there? If it's true, I'll kill you."

"It was Lady Cunningham, I tell you. If you stop to kill me you'll never save her. Are you mad? Oh, on; the smoke may already have overpowered her," cried the woman, excitedly. "And, mark me, should you meet my lady on your way, she will not allow you to proceed."

By this time, Jack had recovered himself. He saw the necessity of being cool, and acting promptly. Even now, oh, Heaven! he might be too late.

Rapidly Jane Derner led him into the house, accompanied him as far as she dared, then gave him directions too clear to be misunderstood.

By the energetic efforts of the firemen, and the copious supply of water, the west tower had been pretty well separated from the rest of the building, but there the flames raged fiercely, with fiery tongues running over and clutching relentlessly the old oak panels, while volumes of smoke, thick and stifling, rolled through the corridors and up the staircases, as if on guard.

But Jack Bramber, rage and terror in his heart, was not to be driven back by heat or smoke.

Swiftly he mounted to the first corridor, then started back amazed, for abruptly, out of the dense smoke, came Lady Cunningham. Her eyes flashed with hate as she beheld him.

"How dare you enter here?" she exclaimed. "What want you?"

"To free Miss Cunningham, whom you have here a prisoner," he answered, passionately.

"It is false! Who told you that?"

"That matters not. Stand aside!" he cried, authoritatively; for, as the smoke grew hotter and more stifling, he knew how precious was every moment.

"I shall not!" she retorted, barring his way. "I tell you there is no one there."

It was no time for ceremony. Jack caught her by the shoulder, but like a vise her arms closed fast round him.

"You shall not go!" she hissed through her teeth. "You have thwarted me once, John Bramber; you shall not again. We'll die together, rather!"

"Woman! fiend!" cried Jack, struggling to free himself; "is not your list of crimes full enough but that you would yet add to it? Know that James Stone's body is to be exhumed, and if poison be found in it, you will be charged as his destroyer!"

"Ah!"

Lady Cunningham could not control that guilty start. Jack seized his advantage, and flung her violently from him. She reeled, staggered back, and disappeared into the veil of smoke.

He heard her fall; but it was not to be supposed he would risk Hilda's safety by attending to her cruel enemy first. Choking with the stifling smoke, his veins swelling, his breath labored, he sprung on, stumbling at times, fearful ever that he should be too late. Oh, Heaven, should he find her suffocated—dead!

The door was reached at last, the key inserted; the next instant Jack was in the room.

That strong door, which had smothered her cries, had been her preservation. It had been a barrier to the smoke. As the young fellow rushed in, calling her name, Hilda sprung into his arms.

"Jack!—oh, dear, brave Jack!—oh, my love!" she exclaimed, in tears of hysterical joy. "Saved, saved!"

One long, passionate embrace, taken, as it were, in the very jaws of death; then, with a few hurried words of explanation, and an entreaty that she would trust in him, which she replied to by a fond hand-pressure, he, half-leading, half-supporting her, and finally carrying, fought his way back through the smoke, which, to his alarm, was rapidly becoming of a reddish hue.

In his anxiety for his beloved charge, he forgot Lady Cunningham. But on reaching the corridor, no one attempted to bar their progress. The place seemed deserted. Had Jack recollected her, he would have imagined she had wisely provided for her own safety.

With much difficulty, finally, staggering and reeling as one drunk with wine, Jack Bramber at last reached the ground floor with Hilda.

As swiftly they made their way to the untouched portion of the Castle, they met others, when Jack had but time to give Hilda to their care before he fell insensible.

At the same instant, there was a fearful crash. Those without beheld an instant's darkness, quickly followed by a mighty cloud of brilliant sparks, followed by an upward rush of a great spiral flame.

The lower portion of the west tower had fallen in, bringing much of the upper with it.

In falling, Lady Cunningham's temple had come in such violent contact with a projection of the cornice of the wainscot as to cause insensibility, and there she still was lying unconscious when Jack Bramber hurried by with Hilda.

Hardly, however, had they passed, than her senses began to return in a dazed fashion.

Stunned by the blow, stifled by smoke, her intellect was not clear enough for reason, or perception of her imminent danger. All she remembered distinctly was that Jack Bramber had gone to rescue Hilda, and her resolve to balk him.

She groped her way to the stairs, and ascended them, reiterating like a madwoman, as at the moment she was, "he can't save

her—he can't—he can't! He hasn't the key—he hasn't the key! They'll both go—both! My revenge will be complete!"

When, however, she found the door open, and the room empty, with a scream of rage, she rushed out and down the stairs.

Blinded, giddy, dazed, her hands burnt, on reaching the first corridor she missed her footing, and fell before she could recover herself.

The crash came, the wall and staircase were carried away, and Lady Cunningham was carried with them, never to open her eyes in this world again; proving Sir Herbert's words to have been true—that she was hard and pitiless unto death.

Had it been Lady Cunningham's intention, as no doubt it was, to destroy the will and Hilda; the only heir to Sir Herbert, in part she had succeeded.

The will was never found!

That it had existed was put beyond dispute by James Stone's confession, signed by Jack and the neighbor's wife, Mrs. Mather.

That had stated that he, James Stone, and Sir Hereward's valet had been summoned into the Baronet's presence during the absence of her ladyship, and required to witness their master sign a paper. They were paid to hold their tongues, and given to understand it was a will, reinstating Mr. Herbert, and most handsomely providing for Lady Cunningham.

He dismissed them with the entreaty that, should he die suddenly, they would make the existence of this will known, if he had not done so previously.

The Baronet dead, the valet had believed that he was doing right in telling her ladyship of the will. Whereupon, not without much difficulty in either case, she had with a large sum purchased the witnesses' silence, James Stone consenting to take less if he were kept in idleness all his days.

In regard to Hilda, her identity was equally placed beyond dispute, for Jane Derner also confessed everything. Lady Cunningham had sent her the very day after the Baronet's death to London, to remove Herbert's child, as if to take it to its father, and to pay any debts that might be owing in Herbert's name.

The little thing was at once put to school as Hilda Horne, and there she remained until fourteen, when she was taken to Lady Cunningham, who was then abroad.

There was one mystery yet that needed elucidating—what had become of Herbert Cunningham?

Here Jane Derner could give a little, but very little, help, and that, she averred, was only obtained by chance.

Having been down to the village on the night previous to the Baronet's death, in taking a short cut through the trees she had come upon two persons. One she knew to be my lady; the other she had imagined was Herbert Cunningham.

She could not get near enough to hear what was being said, but the two seemed on friendly terms.

Before they parted they had come closer, and Jane Derner heard Lady Cunningham distinctly say these words: "Farewell until to-morrow. I need not say be punctual."

The next day, entering the oak bed-chamber while the Baronet was under the influence of a soporific, she had seen my lady coming through the secret panel into the room. Jane Derner had noiselessly withdrawn, unperceived; but when her time came to watch, she had entered the passage herself, but found nothing, save that the boards were very unsafe, and at one part had, as it appeared to her, recently broken, or been broken away, exposing a dark, yawning chasm below.

Whether Jane Derner's recital was true, or she had reconstructed it to shield herself from the punishment of complicity, could not be decided, but the connecting link of her story and Sir Herbert's singular disappearance was arrived at when the workmen, removing the

ruins of the west wing, came upon a skeleton, which the letters and remnants of clothes found near, proved to have once been Herbert Cunningham, at a spot that must have been immediately beneath the secret passage.

Lady Cunningham had lured the unhappy man to his ruin, and he had fallen into the trap.

Little remains to be told. Though the second will was never discovered, Hilda, by the first, came into her right, as Lady Cunningham had died unmarried.

Being so friendless, she readily consented to a quiet union with Jack, when they started for the Continent, to which Lord Bramber, rather crestfallen, but thankful for his escape, had already flown.

It was three years before Mr. and Mrs. Bramber returned to Cunningham, which soon put on quite a gay and festive appearance. Happiness, as unalloyed as earthly happiness can be, took up its perpetual abode there. The ancient walls, and the dim, soft shadows among the old trees, were made musical by children's laughter. But to their dying day, a cold, chill shudder would pass through Jack and Hilda, even in their supremest moments of happiness, when they thought of beautiful Lady Gwendoline and her better vengeance.

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